

THE EDUCATION OF ERIC LANE

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THE SENSATIONALISTS: II
THE EDUCATION OF
ERIC LANE

STEPHEN McKENNA

By STEPHEN McKENNA

THE SENSATIONALISTS

PART ONE: LADY LILITH

PART TWO: THE EDUCATION
OF ERIC LANE

PART THREE: *In preparation*

SONIA MARRIED

SONIA

MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHEILA INTERVENES

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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BY

STEPHEN McKENNA

AUTHOR OF "LADY LILITH," "SONIA MARRIED,"
"MIDAS AND SON," "SONIA," "NINETY-
SIX HOURS' LEAVE," ETC.



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THE EDUCATION OF
ERIC LANE

“Because lust was not good enough, the Celt
invented romance.”

—SHANE LESLIE: *The End of a Chapter.*

THE EDUCATION OF ERIC LANE

CHAPTER ONE

AN EXPERIMENT IN EMOTION

"... A genial . . . bachelor, whom the outside world called selfish because it derived no particular benefit from him. . . ."

OSCAR WILDE: "THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY."

I

ERIC LANE, visible only from ear to chin above the water-line, peered through the steam of the bathroom at a travelling-clock on his dressing-table. The bath would have been improved by another half handful of verbena salts; but, even lacking this, the water was still too hot to be lightly dismissed with an aggrieved gurgle down the waste-pipe. It was an added self-indulgence to know that, if he lay gently boiling himself for more than another minute, he would be late for dinner with Lady Poynter; but, if any one had to suffer, let it be Lady Poynter. It was not his fault that the rehearsal of "The Bomb-Shell" had dragged on until after seven; something had to be sacrificed—the letters which his secretary had left for him to sign, or the hot bath, or the cigarette and glass of sherry as he dressed, or (in the last resort and quite obviously) Lady Poynter. He had already foregone a cocktail, which would have made him two minutes later.

As the water began to cool, Eric threw a towel over his shoulders, wiped the steam from the face of the clock and began to dry himself slowly, looking round with ever-fresh delight at the calculated ingenuity of comfort in his new flat. It was his reward for the successful play. For ten years after coming down from Oxford he had lived in the Temple, first with Jack Waring and afterwards by himself; lonely, hard-working years, when he had painfully learned the value of money and time. With one play running indefatigably, another rehearsing and a third in sight of completion, he had decided to construct a frame better suited to his new position. Ten years ago he had dreamed at Oxford of a day when he would burst upon London as a new young Byron; and, when the dream was almost forgotten, he found himself living in its midst. He was courted and quoted, photographed and "paragraphed"; Lady Poynter and the rich, malcontent world which aspired to intelligence humbly invited him to dine, and it did not matter whether she wanted to pay him homage or to exhibit him as her latest celebrity. It was time to leave the Temple and to burst, fully equipped, upon London. A friend in the artillery made over the remainder of his lease, and Eric gave himself a fortnight's holiday to order the furnishing and decoration of the six tiny rooms. When he surveyed telephone and dictaphone, switches and presses, files and cases, tables and lights, he felt that the ease and beauty of which he had dreamed were dulled and stunted by the reality.

Over the dressing-table hung a framed poster of his play: "*Regency Theatre*" in a scroll of blue lettering: "*A Divorce Has Been Arranged*" under it; then his own name; then the cast. Eric looked affectionately at the trophy, as he began to comb his dripping, black hair. He was proud of the play and grateful to it; grateful for money, reputation and the added importance of himself. As he entered

the Carlton that day one unknown woman had whispered to another, "Isn't that Eric Lane? I thought he was older." He was boy enough to be gratified that seventeen people had stopped him that morning between Grosvenor Street and Piccadilly. Eight months ago no one outside Fleet Street or the Thespian Club had heard of him. Jack Waring and O'Rane, Loring and Deganway always seemed to regard him as a harmless eccentric who wrote unacceptable plays for his own amusement. . . .

The hair-brushing completed, he put on a dressing-gown and crossed the hall to his smoking-room for the sherry and cigarette. On the table lay a pile of typewritten letters, awaiting his signature, and another pile not yet opened and secured from the late summer breeze by a glass paper-weight. It was shaped like a horse-shoe and had been sent him on his first night, to be followed by a telegram: "*Best wishes for all possible success Agnes.*" He had kept it for luck and in gratitude to Agnes Waring, who had been a sympathetic, if rather indiscriminating, friend for many years. Until eight months ago he had never earned enough money to think of marrying; and, at thirty-two, he told himself that he was not a marrying man; but more than once in the early hours of triumph he had thought of Agnes and of his own return to Lashmar; they had often talked jestingly of the day when he would come back famous, and behind the jest lay a hint of romance and sentiment which told him that she was waiting for him and believed in his success when he himself doubted it.

Next to the letters lay an album in which his secretary had at last finished pasting his press-cuttings. He could not resist the temptation to glance at two or three of his favourite notices before opening the letters. The critics had treated him kindly, for he had been a critic himself and had not scrupled to secure a good press; but mere flattery never kept a bad play running. . . . He decided

that he was going to enjoy his dinner with the Poynters, though the chiming of the clock in the hall warned him that he could not hope to be dressed and in Belgrave Square by a quarter past eight. The new Byron would achieve an effect, if he gained the reputation of *always* being ten minutes late for everything; but the pose offended Eric's sense of tidiness. Signing his letters, he ripped open half-a-dozen envelopes and glanced at the contents, pushed the news-cutting album neatly into its shelf and hurried into his bedroom with a glass of sherry in his hand.

It was time to order a taxi, and a tall Scotch parlour-maid, of whom he lived in secret dread, came in answer to his ring. He would have preferred a man, but men were unprocurable in war-time. He let fall a word of instruction on the correct way of laying out dress-clothes and was beginning to get ready in earnest, when the telephone-bell rang simultaneously in bedroom, bathroom, dining-room and smoking-room. As he finished his sherry, he tried to remember where he had left the instrument.

"Hul-lo," he cried, exploring to see whether the bathroom chair was dry.

"That you, Ricky? Sybil speaking. I say, are you coming down on Saturday? You've not been here for months, and we want to see you."

Eric sighed patiently before he remembered that the sigh was unlikely to carry as far as Winchester. The prophet could look for affection in his own country and in his own house; he would not find honour.

"If you feel I'm essential to the family happiness——" he began.

"You're not. But we've got some people dining on Saturday—Agnes Waring amongst others. You can bring your work with you. . . . Say you'll come, like a good boy, and don't be selfish."

"Well, I might," Eric answered. "Good-bye, Sybil."

"You needn't be in such a hurry! What are you doing to-night?"

"I'm being—*extraordinarily*—late for dinner with some people I don't know," he answered.

His sister's voice in reply was slightly aggrieved.

"I wouldn't detain you for worlds. I only wanted to know if you'd seen a full-page photograph of yourself——"

"In the 'Gallery.' Yes, I know the editor and I got him to shove it in. As my own advertising agent, I take a lot of beating. Good-bye, Sybil."

"Good-bye, selfish pig. You're being spoilt by success, you know."

Eric made no answer, but, as he snatched up his hat and cane, still more as he settled himself in the taxi with his feet on the opposite seat, he reflected with philosophic indulgence how wide of the mark his sister had fired. He was self-satisfied, perhaps, as he had some reason to be; self-sufficient, assuredly, as he had set out to become. After all, he could have entered the Civil Service ten years before, as his father had wished; and there would have been ten years of material comfort, an unchallengeable social position, a wife, a home, spiritual paralysis and soul-destroying domestic worries as his portion. Instead, he had elected to make his own way in a hard and somewhat despised school. A young journalist had no status. People invited him to their houses, because he had been at the same college as their sons, because other people had already taken the plunge; but he had always had enough detachment to recognize where the intimacy was to stop.

Now he was being accepted at his own valuation. As he passed the Ritz, two officers and a girl hailed a taxi and told the driver to take them to the Regency. At eleven o'clock they would be saying: "Good show, that." (Had he not loitered in the hall of the theatre, with coat-collar turned up, to hear just that?) In another month they

would be going to "The Bomb-Shell," because it was by the fellow who wrote "A Divorce Has Been Arranged." . . . He had money, friends, adulators and the health to do a full day's work. In speaking to Sybil, he had only hesitated because he was not sure whether he wanted to meet Agnes Waring yet. When they became engaged. . . . *If* they became engaged, he would lose in interest with the women like Lady Poynter who were always inviting him to be lionized. . . .

As the taxi drew up in Belgrave Square, he looked at his watch. Twenty-seven minutes past eight. He handed his hat and cane to a footman and followed the butler upstairs with complete self-possession. As he was asked his name at the door of the drawing-room, however, he stammered:

"Mr. Eric L-lane."

It was intolerable that he could not overcome that stammer, so entirely alien to a new young Byron. . . .

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Lady Poynter had finished dressing and was writing in her diary when her maid entered to ask whether Mrs. Shelley might come in. At luncheon the Duchess of Ross had complained that no one would give her a chance of meeting young Eric Lane; Gerald Deganway had murmured, "One poor martyr without a lion"; and, as Deganway was incapable of originating anything, Lady Poynter felt that she was not infringing any copyright in recording the jest against that day when Eleanor Ross tried to steal any more of her young men the moment she had put a polish on them and made them known. . . .

"Angel Marion!" cried Lady Poynter, throwing down her pen so that it described an inky semi-circle. "The idea of asking!"

She embraced her guest as effusively as she had addressed her. Lady Poynter was forty-eight years of age, daily increasing in bulk, masculine in voice, intellectual through vanity and childless by preference. Her husband was rich, patient, stupid and self-indulgent, bearing with her literary passions and in self-defence displaying that care for household comfort which it was Lady Poynter's pride to neglect. Why, she asked, were men given brains if they made gods of their bellies? Mrs. Shelley was the widow of a well-known free-lance journalist, who in his day had brought her into contact with a sufficient number of authors for her to imitate on austere simple lines the symposia of wit and learning which Lady Poynter assembled on the strength of her own personality and her husband's cellar. There was a long-standing gentle competition between the two, which they abandoned in common hostility to Lady Maitland, who excelled them both in the ruthlessness and speed of her hunting. At the moment, however, Mrs. Shelley had eclipsed both her rivals by the chance of having known Eric Lane for ten years; to Lady Maitland he was still "Mr. Eric," to Lady Poynter "Mr. Lane."

"You don't mind my coming like this, do you?" she asked timidly, disengaging herself from Lady Poynter's embrace and indicating her commandant's uniform. "I was at the hospital until eight."

"As if I minded what you wore!" her hostess cried. "In war-time, when we haven't a moment to turn round . . . ! And it isn't as if this were a party."

Mrs. Shelley walked to a mirror and looked thoughtfully at her unassertive reflection. Her hair was a dusty brown, her eyes an unsoftening grey, and her cheeks, which were careworn with exacting, humble ambition, acted at once as frame and background for a thin nose and unrelaxing mouth.

"You always say that, darling," she protested gently,

leaning forward to the mirror and dabbing at herself with a powder-puff. "And it means the *most* delightful——"

"I've got Eric Lane coming," interrupted Lady Poynter, groping for a crumpled half-sheet of paper marked as with the sweeping strokes of a hay-rake in soft mud. "Who else? Sonia O'Rane you know; Max—or did Max say he was dining at his club? It doesn't matter, because I can't pretend that Max contributes much, even though he is my husband; then there's my nephew, Johnnie Gaymer; and Babs Neave——"

"Dear Babs," murmured Mrs. Shelley with conscientious enthusiasm. It was her favourite boast that she sincerely tried to make allowances for all and permitted ill-speaking of none. In the years before the war, when Lady Barbara's friends were wondering whether they really could continue to know her, Mrs. Shelley remained embarrassingly loyal. "I haven't seen her for months."

"She's been nursing at Crawleigh all this time, simply wearing herself out. I've never seen any one so changed. We met in Bond Street this morning; I hadn't *meant* to invite her, but I felt I must do *something*. . . ." Lady Poynter projected herself from the sofa and rustled to the door, murmuring: "I *must* find out whether Max is dining at home to-night."

Mrs. Shelley made her way downstairs to the drawing-room and stood on the balcony outside one of the French windows, looking down through the warm dusk on Belgrave Square. An open taxi drew up at the door, and she watched Mrs. O'Rane descending daintily and smiling at the driver; a second taxi drove from the opposite corner of the square, and Captain Gaymer, in Flying Corps uniform, jumped out and hurried to the door, looking apprehensively at his watch. Mrs. Shelley left the balcony and shook hands with Lord Poynter who was dutifully dressed

in time to receive any guests who might arrive before his wife appeared.

"Two. Four," he counted timidly. "Babs Neave is sure to be late. That leaves only Lane. Does every one know him?"

An indistinct murmur was drowned by Gaymer, who knitted his brows and repeated:

"Lane? Eric Lane? The dramatist fellow? I saw something about him in one of the picture-papers to-day, when I was having my hair cut. Oh, I know! He'd left London, and letters weren't going to be forwarded. Didn't he tell you?" he asked as his aunt crossed the room in concern.

Lady Poynter's jaw fell in affronted indignation. Lady Maitland had already secured Mr. Lane for luncheon, the Duchess of Ross had wired: "Don't know you but must. Have just seen your play. When will you dine?" and Mrs. Shelley had staked out a claim before any one else had heard of the man.

"That is really *too* abominable," she cried. "He made a note of the time in his book . . . only two days ago. . . . And then he hasn't the consideration even to telephone."

She counted the numbers and turned angrily, as the door was thrown open. After pausing on the threshold to see who was present, Lady Barbara Neave entered the room falteringly and with a suggestion that she was belatedly repenting a too venturesome effect in dress. The men, she knew, were only watching her eyes and waiting for the surprised smile of recognition which always made them feel that they had been missed; but Mrs. Shelley, she would wager, was privately noting that a dove-coloured silk dress and a scarlet shawl embroidered with birds in flight made a white face look ashen; Sonia O'Rane was probably wondering why her maid did not tell her that a band of black tulle with a red rose at one side simply emphasized her

hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. . . . She moved listlessly and smiled mysteriously to herself as though unconscious that every one was silent and watchful; then the surprised smile transfigured her, she kissed the other women with childlike abandon, leaving the men to watch and envy.

"Babs, darling, it is sweet of you to come. I've no party for you," said Lady Poynter, forgiving the girl's lateness and forgetting her own discomfiture.

Barbara shook her head and looked round the room with eyes which had lost their momentary colour, as though the light behind them had been doused.

"I've forgotten what it's like to meet people and try to talk intelligently," she laughed with the mirthlessness of physical exhaustion. "Well, Max! And Johnnie! I'm sorry to be late, Margaret, but until the last moment I didn't know that I should feel up to coming."

"If you'd thrown me over, too——" began Lady Poynter. "Give us some light, Max. My dear, you're losing all your looks, and that black thing gives you a face like a sheet of mourning note-paper. You *must* take proper care of yourself. And you're nothing but skin and bones."

Barbara smiled again, as listlessly as before.

"Yes. My maid has given notice; I don't do her credit. . . . But I'm a dull subject of conversation. How's dear Marion been all this time?"

She broke up the group by drawing Mrs. Shelley to a sofa with her and again looked cautiously round the room. This was the first time that she had dined out since her illness, almost the first time since the beginning of the war; and the light and noise, magnified by fancy and sensitive nerves, made her dizzy. Her mother and the doctor had tried to keep her at home; but natural obstinacy and uncontrollable whim had been too much for them. A few weeks ago she had fainted in the train, as she returned to London from Crawleigh Abbey; an unknown man had taken care

of her, but, though she remembered his voice, she was too giddy to see or recall his face. On arriving at her father's house in Berkeley Square, she found her fingers grasping a silver flask with a monogram "E. L."; and that morning, when Lady Poynter invited her to dinner, she had divined that "E. L." must stand for Eric Lane. The coincidence would not have been worth following by itself, but in the latter days of her illness she had repeatedly dreamed of a child with the stranger's voice; and, vaguely and shame-facedly, Barbara believed that dreams had an influence on life and were glimpses beyond the veil of the unknown. She was coming to believe, too, in predestination as the one cause able to explain a long series of isolated acts for which she could not hold herself responsible; and to-night predestination would be put to the test, for half-a-dozen people had already invited her to meet Eric Lane and for one reason or another she had never been able to accept. It was the thought that she might be meeting him at last which had so taken away her composure that she had hardly been able to cross the room.

"I don't think it's worth waiting," muttered Lady Poynter, her indignation returning reinforced by hunger. "You might ring the bell, Max, and find whether any telephone message *has* been received——"

"It's Eric Lane," Mrs. Shelley explained. "Captain Gaymer was saying that he'd left London."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I've never met him," said Barbara.

Evidently she was predestined never to meet him; and the noise and light made her too giddy to decide whether she was relieved or disappointed. Predestination was winning another round; and, while she was ill and unresisting, it was comforting to feel that she was not responsible for all the follies and the one crime which had ruined her life; but it was sad to feel that she would never meet the hero of her dream-romance. He might have filled the whole of

a life that for a year had been empty and aching; at the lowest computation, their meeting would have been an experiment in emotion. . . .

Lord Poynter had shambled flat-footedly half-way to the bell, when the door was thrown open again and the butler announced "Mr. Eric Lane." There was a tiny stir of interest among those who had not met him and of surprise among all. Eric's eyes narrowed for a moment under the light of the chandelier; then he collected himself, swiftly identified Lady Poynter and shook her hand with a murmur of apology for his lateness.

"But, dear man, we'd given you up!" she exclaimed. "Why did you frighten us by announcing in the papers that you'd left London? You've not met Max, have you?"

Eric shook hands with Lord Poynter.

"That was my s-secretary," he explained. Shyness was rushing in waves to his head, and he could only save himself from disgrace by pretending to be more icily collected than any one in the room. "I'm f-frightfully overworked at present with rehearsals and things, so I applied for a f-fortnight's leave from my department and everybody thinks I'm f-fishing in Scotland or doing a walking tour on Dartmoor. This party is my f-final dissipation, Lady Poynter."

He looked round to see with whom he had still to shake hands. As he began to speak, Barbara had shivered so violently that Mrs. Shelley turned at the movement; then she tried to remember even seeing his face as he bent over her in the train and carried her along the platform at Waterloo. She was paralyzed with dread of the moment when he would recognize her, for she had nothing adequate to the drama of their meeting. . . . He shook hands first with those nearest to him, and she hastened to make a mental picture before he saw that she was watching him; black hair, a thin face restless with vitality, bloodless lips

tightly shut and eyes that were out of keeping with the assurance of the face—eyes unexpectedly big and soft, deep in colour and timid in expression, reminding her of the stammer and quick eagerness of his speech.

He was shaking hands now with Mrs. Shelley, and Barbara grew rigid with fear. His face turned, and their eyes met; but he passed on to Gaymer without recognizing her. She found herself trembling with relief; and the reaction swept away disappointment and all interest but dislike. Voice and eyes, movements and manner became hateful to her; she longed for an opportunity of upsetting his precarious composure, of pricking his conceit and hurting him. If Margaret Poynter did not put her next to him, she would walk out of the room and go home. . . .

The butler entered to announce that dinner was served, and Lady Poynter, with an unconcentrated "Babs, you haven't met Mr. Lane, have you?" tried to remember her ordering of the table.

"Tell me who 'Babs' is," Eric begged in an undertone, as he and Gaymer prepared to follow the others down to the dining-room.

"Babs Neave? Don't you know her?" Gaymer asked in surprise.

"Oh, by name, of course. I didn't recognize her."

"She's been rather ill, I think."

As he pulled his napkin out of its folds, Eric stole a glance at Barbara. By sight he had known her distantly for years as a girl who hardly missed a first night or private view; she was always to be found acting, reciting or at least selling programmes at charity *matinées*; he had seen her at Stage Society performances, and the illustrated papers gave her a full-page photograph after any of the big costume balls. And, like most of his generation, he knew her by reputation better than by sight; for half-a-dozen years her epigrams and escapades had been on every

one's lips; while he was still at Oxford and she a child of twelve, her cousin Lord Loring had wondered despairingly what was to be done with her. On the disclosure of her name, Eric had expected to see some one flamboyant and assertive. He was relieved to find her quiet and reserved, a little hostile, perhaps bored and certainly ill.

"I'm so sorry to hear you've not been well," he began timidly. Her expression and the angle at which she was seated convinced him that he had left an unfavourable impression on her, and he half feared a rebuff. "I suppose, like every one else, you've been overworking?"

3

"You'll find me thoroughly dull," Barbara announced abruptly, with the candour of one who studies her effects and with a brusqueness which discouraged further advances. "The doctor says—oh, Mrs. O'Rane's trying to attract your attention."

Eric felt himself dismissed and, submitting to her hint, looked over the malachite bowls of white roses to the place where Mrs. O'Rane was leaning forward with one elbow on the table and her other hand repressing Gaymer. The cast of the "Divorce" was being slightly changed, and they had thought it worth while to venture a sovereign on the name of one nonentity who was retiring in favour of another. Eric adjudicated in Gaymer's favour and was turning to give Barbara a last chance, when he found that the flood-gates were open and that every one, taking his time from Lady Poynter, was prepared to discuss dramatic art in general and, in particular, the construction and history of his play. Their enquiries were simple-minded; bombarded from four different quarters at once, he took the questions at the volley; then, as they seemed interested, he became more expansive, losing his stammer and straying

unconsciously into an unrehearsed lecture. There were occasional objections and challenges; but Lady Poynter silenced them ruthlessly with a "Now, my dear, you mustn't interrupt when Mr. Lane's explaining the whole basis of his art," and he discovered suddenly that he was talking well.

"I expect you're tired of hearing it, but I *loved* that play of yours," said his hostess with a beaming glance which confidently asked her other guests whether she was not well justified in summoning them to meet him. "I've been to see it three times."

"I've been twice, and some one's taking me to it again to-morrow," continued Mrs. O'Rane, for whom no subject of conversation was complete until she had decorated it with a personal touch.

"Even I've been once," murmured Barbara, rousing reluctantly from the silence which she had maintained since the beginning of dinner. "George Oakleigh insisted on taking me. It seems to be having a great success, Mr. Lane."

Eric smiled a little self-consciously; but her deliberate avoidance of enthusiasm chilled him after Lady Poynter's extravagant appreciation.

"No one here seems to have escaped it," he said.

"I kept thinking how clever of you it was to write it," she went on, half to herself.

Such criticism led to nothing but a second self-conscious smile; and, knowing her reputation, he had expected something more stimulating.

"Was it a good house?" he asked.

"Very full, if that's what you mean." She looked past him and lowered her voice. "It was full of Lady Poynters," she went on. "Rows and rows of them. They took it conscientiously, they laughed at the jokes, they missed nothing, even the obvious things; and, if I went next week, I should find them all there again—or other people exactly

like them. It was a wonderful—" she hesitated and looked at him long enough to see that he was perplexed, if not annoyed—"experience."

"I hope you don't regret going?"

"Very few plays are as amusing as the audience," she answered thoughtfully. "Oh, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I wondered what you were like. . . ." She turned to look at him with leisurely and unsmiling interest. "I expected to find you much younger. How old are you? Twenty-six? *Thirty-two!* You're ten years older than I am! What in the world have you been doing with yourself?"

"That would take *rather* a long time to tell!" he laughed.

"I don't expect it would. Life is not measured by days, but by sensations. . . ."

"Those you experience or those you create?" Eric interrupted.

Barbara turned away and nodded to herself.

"It's like that, is it?" she murmured. "Are you declaring war? If so, you're clever enough to fight with your own weapons instead of picking up the rusty swords of men I've already beaten. You knew little Val Arden, of course? And my cousin Jim Loring? *They* taught you to call me a 'sensationalist.' Labels are an indolent man's device for guessing what's inside a bottle without tasting."

"They sometimes prevent accidental poisoning."

"If the right labels are on the right bottles. That's what I have to find out. And it's worth an occasional risk. . . . Sensationalist! I collect new emotions, but you must be *bourgeois* yourself if you want to *épater le bourgeois*. Now, *you* can't have had many emotions, or you wouldn't have written that play. And yet—what were you doing before?" she demanded abruptly.

"I followed the despised calling of a journalist."

"Ah!"

She nodded and began eating her quail without explaining herself further. Eric was nettled by her tone, for she was taking pains to let him see that she had not liked his play, perhaps even that she despised him for writing it. He half turned to Lady Poynter, but she was deep in conversation with her nephew. For a time he, too, concentrated his attention on the quail; but every one else was talking, and, though Barbara's challenge was too pert to be taken seriously, he felt that half-praise from her was more valuable than the adulation of women like Mrs. Shelley who were content to worship success for its own sake.

"What was the precise meaning of the 'Ah!'" he enquired lazily.

"'Meaning'; not 'precise meaning.' You surely don't want me to see that you're rather losing your temper and trying to cover it up by being dignified. You've been so careful with your effects, too! . . . I said 'Ah,' because you'd given me the clue I was looking for. You were a very clever journalist, I should think."

"Isn't that rash on half an hour's acquaintance?"

"You're forgetting your play—for the first time since it was produced! I felt that, however bad it was as a play, it was first-rate journalism. I've told you that I kept thinking how clever of you it was to write it. You mustn't think I didn't enjoy myself. The construction's quite tolerable, and the dialogue's admirable—not a word too much, not a syllable put in for 'cleverness,' no epigrams for epigrams' sake. And you've got a good sense of the theatre."

"I was a dramatic critic for some years. Hence my good press."

"Ah! Well, I felt that night that, if you weren't too old and set, you might live to write a really good play." He bowed slightly. "Have you a cigarette? I hate people smoking in the middle of meals; but Margaret's begun, and I must have something to drown it. Now *that*, I suppose,

would be called an ironical bow, wouldn't it? I mean, in your stage directions? You must guard against that kind of thing, you know."

"I will endeavour to do so, Lady Barbara."

"'Try,' not 'endeavour.' And you mustn't talk like your own characters; you've no idea how debilitating that is. It's bad enough when you try to drag us into the world of your plays, but it's intolerable if you try to drag your plays into our world. Did you ever read a story about a boy who lost all sense of reality by going to the theatre too much? He became dramatic. He slapped his forehead and groaned—— Well, we *don't* slap our foreheads or groan, however great the provocation. And in moments of stress he would shake hands with people and turn away to hide his emotion. And it wasn't only in gestures, he became dramatic in conduct. When compromising letters came into his hands, he used to burn them unread and without any one looking on, which is manifestly absurd. I forget what happened to him in the end, but I expect he was charged with something he hadn't done to save the husband of the woman he wanted to marry—and whom he'd have made perfectly miserable, if she hadn't taken him in hand very firmly at the outset. And he'd have insisted on having all their quarrels in her bedroom."

Barbara seemed to have talked away her listlessness. The champagne had brought colour into her cheeks and eyes. Eric looked at her with new interest, waiting for the next abrupt change.

"I'm not finding you as thoroughly dull as you warned me to expect," he observed, borrowing her candour of speech.

"I should think not! I'm never dull when it's worth while taking any trouble. I didn't think you *were* worth while, till you began talking. Then I saw that in spite of the play——"

"I didn't think I should be spared that," he murmured.

"And the poses——"

"Poses?"

"Oh, my dear child, you've postured and advertised yourself till every one's sick of you! A good press—I should think you had! You're never out of it! An announcement that you've left London—and the intolerable effrontery of telling us all about it! The only way you could escape from your mob of adorers."

"I don't think I used the word 'adorers'; and I've *got* to find time somehow to rehearse my new play."

His voice had grown a little stiff. Barbara smiled to herself and discovered suddenly that the desire to hurt him was dead.

"When's the new play coming out?" she asked.

"In the middle of next month."

"You can't make it later?"

"Are you afraid you won't be able to attend the first night?" he laughed.

"God forbid! But I shan't have time to complete your education in a month. Now, I'm talking seriously. Put that play off! You're only a child, you've made a mint of money out of this present abomination. If you'll wait till I've educated you——"

Her pupils had dilated until the irises were swamped in black. The early warm flush had shrunk and intensified into two vivid splashes of colour over her cheek-bones. Neurotic, Eric decided; but arresting and magnetic.

"And what do you propose to teach me?" he enquired.

As he spoke, he was conscious of a lull in the conversation. Without looking round, he knew that every one was watching them and that both their voices had risen a tone.

"Life!" she cried. "You've never *met* men and women. I told George Oakleigh so that night. That's why the public loves your play."

Eric turned to Lady Poynter.

"I have a new play coming out next month," he explained, "and Lady Barbara wants me to hang it up till she's taught me—did you say 'life'?"

"Yes! Margaret, darling, any young man may write *one* successful bad play——"

There was a gasp of orotund protest from Lady Poynter.

"My *dear* Babs!"

"Of course it's a bad play! What I don't know about bad plays isn't worth knowing, I've seen so many of them! Have you *ever* met a woman, Mr. Lane? Have you ever even *fancied* that you were in love?"

Eric took a cigarette and lighted one for Barbara.

"I thought I knew a lot about life when I was twenty-two," he said, studiously reflective. "I'd just come down from Oxford."

Her attention seemed to have wandered to her cigarette, for she drew hard at it and then asked for another match.

"Which was your college?" she enquired with neurotic suddenness of transition.

"Trinity."

"Did you know my brother? He must have been up about your time. He was at the House."

"I knew him by sight. Tall, fair-haired man; he was on the Bullingdon. I never met him, though. I didn't know many men at the House."

Barbara thought for a moment.

"I don't believe I know any one who was at Trinity in your time. Did you ever meet a man called Waring?"

"Jack Waring of New College? I've known him all my life. They're neighbours of ours in Hampshire. You know he's missing?"

Barbara nodded quickly.

"So I heard. . . . I suppose nothing definite's known?"

"I haven't met any of the family since the news was published, but I shall see his sister this week-end."

"Well, if you can find out anything without too much bother——"

"Oh, she's a great friend of mine," Eric explained. "It's no trouble."

Barbara turned to him with a rapid backward cast to her earlier quest.

"Are you in love with her? Oh, but why not?" she demanded querulously. "It would do you so much good—as a man and as a writer. You'll never get rid of your self-satisfaction till then; and you'll never write a good play. It's such a pity, when you've everything except the psychology. Why don't you fall in love with me? I could teach you such a lot, and you'd never regret it." Barbara caught her hostess' eye and picked up her gloves. "You'd write a tolerable play in the middle of it, a work of genius at the end——"

Eric's laugh interrupted her eager outpour.

"I'm quite satisfied to be an observer of life."

"Dear child, you're quite satisfied with *everything*. You're sunk in soulless contentment; you shirk emotion because it would force you to see below the pink-and-white surface; that's why you write such bad plays. Margaret!" She approached Lady Poynter with outstretched arms. "I've argued myself hoarse trying to persuade Mr. Lane to fall in love with me. Do see what you can do! He shews all the obstinacy of a young, weak man; he won't *see* how much I should improve him. When he'd learnt life at my hands——"

Lady Poynter threw a crushing arm round the girl's waist.

"Come on, Babs. You're looking better than you did," she said. "I *told* you you'd fall in love with him," she added, as they walked upstairs.

"There's nothing much the matter with Babs," commented Gaymer meaningly, as he shut the door and settled into a chair beside Lord Poynter.

4

As Barbara's voice faded and died away, an air of guilty quiet settled upon the dining-room. Eric tidied himself a place among her wreckage of crumpled napkin, sloppy finger-bowl, nut-shells and cigarette-ash. For ten minutes he could rest; conversation with either of his companions threatened to be as difficult as it was unnecessary. John Gaymer, in upbringing, intellect, habits of mind and method of speech, belonged to a self-centred world which cheerfully defied subjugation by a brigade of Byrons, reinforced by a division of Wesleys and an army of Rousseaus; for him there was one school and no other, one college and no other, one regiment, club, restaurant, music-hall, tailor, hair-dresser and no other. Eric was always meeting John Gaymers and never penetrating below the sleek, well-bred and uninterested exterior; they were politely repellent, as though an intrusion from outside would disturb their serenity and the advantageous bargain which they had struck with life; it might cause them to think, and thought was a synonym of death. The Flying Corps, at first sight, was an unassimilating environment for a John Gaymer, but this one had not gone in alone and he had certainly not been assimilated. A closely knit and self-isolated group had formed itself there, as it could be trusted to form itself in a house-party or under the shadow of the guillotine, genially unapproachable and uncaringly envied.

To shew his fairness and breadth of mind Eric tested the specimen under his hand with politics, the war and a current libel action, only to be rewarded at the third venture. Before surrendering to his desire for silence and

rest, he glanced under lowered lids at his host's blue-tinged, loosely-hanging cheeks. Conscientiously silent when his wife wished to discuss literature with her new discoveries, Lord Poynter became dutifully loquacious when exposed defenceless to the task of entertaining them and took refuge in gusty, nervous geniality or odd, sly confidences on matters of no moment.

"Aren't you drinking any port wine?" he demanded of Eric after brooding indecision.

"Thank you, yes. It's a '63, isn't it?" Eric asked, as he helped himself and passed the decanter.

Lord Poynter's discoloured eyes shone with interest for the first time that night.

"Ah, come now! A kindred spirit!" he wheezed welcomingly. "I'll be honest with you; I was in two minds whether to give you that wine to-night. Women don't appreciate it, they're not educated up to it. It was that or the Jubilee Sandeman, and I'm *not* an admirer of the Jubilee wines. Very delicate, very *good*," he cooed, "but—well, you'll understand me if I call them all *women's* wines. Now, if you *like* port, I've a few bottles of '72 Gould Campbell. . . . Johnny, your grandfather would have had a fit, if he'd seen you trying to drink port wine with a cigarette in your mouth. Not that it makes much difference, when people have been smoking all the way through dinner; your palate's tainted before you come to your wine. People pretend that it makes a difference whether you approach the tobacco through the wine or the wine through the tobacco. I don't see it, myself. . . ."

His tongue uncoiled, he soliloquized on wines of the past and present, as the survivor of a dead generation might dwell dotingly on the great men and beautiful women of a long life-time. Empire, devolving its cares upon his shoulders, enabled him—as he explained with sly gusto—to secure that there should be no inharmonious intrusion of

coffee and liqueurs until the sacred wine had been in reverent circulation for twenty minutes. Half-way through, warming to his new friend, he rang for a bottle of wood port first known to history in 1823, when it was already a middle-aged wine, and fortified from every subsequent vintage.

"I don't say you'll like it, but it's an experience," he told Eric with an air of cunning, respectable conspiracy. "Like a *ve-ery* dry sherry. If I may advise you, I would say, 'Drink it as a liqueur'; don't waste your time on my brandy, I'm afraid I've none fit to offer *you*. There was a tragedy about my last bottle of the Waterloo. . . ."

He diverged into a long and untidy story about a dinner-party in honour of a late Austrian Ambassador which coincided with the collapse of his wife's maid with pneumonia. Eric, listening with half his brain, wondered whether any one would believe him if he transplanted the room, the conversation and Lord Poynter into a play; with the other half he thought of Lady Barbara's advice that he should fall in love, if not with her, at least with somebody. His sister's telephone message had started the train of thought; he was looking forward to the week-end and the opportunity of meeting Agnes Waring. The time would come—if there were many hosts like Lord Poynter and if they all talked "Hibernia" port and Tuileries brandy, it would come very soon—when he would grow tired of being pushed from one house to another and made to talk for the diversion of sham intellectuals. In this, at least, he had had enough of his triumphal progress; there was rest and companionship in being married, it was the greatest of all adventures. . . . He wondered how Agnes would acquit herself at a party like this; he would not like people to cease inviting him because they felt bound to invite a tiresome wife as well. . . .

Gaymer, too, was growing impatient of his uncle's cellar

Odyssey and was calling aloud for a cigar, while he scoured the side-board for Benedictine.

"They'll be wondering where we've got to," said Lord Poynter guiltily, recalling his mind from a distance and lapsing into silence. And Eric felt compunction in helping to cut short the man's one half-hour of happiness in the day.

In the drawing-room they found the four women seated at a bridge-table, disagreeing over the score. Lady Poynter archly reproached her husband and Gaymer for "monopolizing poor Mr. Lane"; there was a shuffling of feet, cutting, changing of chairs, and Mrs. Shelley crept to the door, whispering that she had to start work early next day or she would not dream of breaking up such a delightful party; she was promptly arrested and brought back by Mrs. O'Rane with the offer of Lady Maitland's brougham, which was to call for her at eleven. After an exhibition of half-hearted self-effacement by all, a new four was made up, and Eric found himself contentedly alone on a sofa with Lord Poynter mid-way between him and the table, uncertain whether to watch the game or venture on more conversation. He had whispered: "I can tell you a story about that cigar you're smoking . . .," when, at the end of the second hand, Barbara looked slowly round, pushed back her chair and walked to the sofa.

"Thinking over your wasted opportunities?" she asked, as she sat down beside Eric.

"There are none," he answered lazily. "I've been a great success to-night. I can see that our host won't rest content till I've promised to dine here three times a week to drink his port; I've been good value to Lady Poynter; if I play bridge, I shall lose a lot of money to Gaymer—not that I don't play quite a fair game, but I'm sure, without even seeing him, that he plays a diabolically good game and I know I shall cut against him. Mrs. Shelley? Every one's

always a success with her; talking to her is as demoralizing as cracking jokes from the Bench. Mrs. O'Rane wants me to write her a duologue—just as one draws a rabbit for a child. . . . That only leaves you. And you capitulated more completely even than Poynter, without the '63 port as an introduction and bond."

Barbara looked at him with a dawning smile.

"I *think* you're the most insufferably conceited young man I've ever met!" she exclaimed.

"I'm adjusting the balance. If you hadn't disparaged me the whole way through dinner. . . . Now, when you got up here, you pumped Mrs. Shelley with both hands for everything you could get her to tell you about me. Didn't you?"

"Well?"

Eric smiled to himself.

"She's the only one here who knows me, but she didn't tell you much."

"I shan't say."

Three impatient voices from the bridge-table met and struggled in an unmelodious chorus of "*Babs! Come—here!*"

She returned a moment later, but had hardly sat down before Gaymer spread out the substantial remains of his hand with a challenge of "Any one anything to say about the rest? Babs, don't keep us waiting *again!*"

As she stood up, Eric rose, too, and said good-bye.

"I have some work to finish before I go to bed," he told her.

"Won't you wait and see me home? Sonia O'Rane's got a brougham, and we'll borrow it first."

Eric laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"You're not very gracious," she pouted.

"It was so transparent. You could go with Mrs. O'Rane.

Or Gaymer would be delighted to find you a taxi. Or you could go on foot."

She drew herself up to her full height.

"Instead of which I humiliated myself by asking a small thing which was just big enough to give you the opportunity of being rude."

She turned away to the table, but stopped at the sound of laughter from Eric. He had hesitated a moment before taking the risk, but laughter seemed the only corrective for her theatrical dignity.

"I spend hours each day watching people rehearsing this sort of thing," he murmured.

"Why do you *imagine* I ask you to see me home?" she demanded, with a petulant stamp.

"Partly because you're enjoying me; partly because you know I want to work and you think it will be such fun to upset my arrangements even by ten minutes."

Barbara smiled at him over her shoulder.

"We're a game all," she pleaded, motioning him back to the sofa.

Eric smiled and lit a cigarette from the stump of his cigar.

Ten minutes later they were driving along Piccadilly towards Berkeley Square, Eric rather tired, Barbara excited and restlessly voluble.

"Is Mr. Lane going to forget our second meeting as quickly and completely as he forgot the first?" she asked.

"The first?" Eric echoed. "This is the first time I've set eyes on you—except in the distance at theatres and places."

"It's the first time I've ever seen your face; but I recognized your voice and, if you will come into the house for a moment, I can restore a certain flask."

Eric turned on her in amazement.

"Was that *you*? Well . . . Good . . . Good Heavens!"

Barbara laughed softly.

"Try not to forget me so quickly again! I've still to apologize for being such a beast when we met to-night. I was ill . . . and miserable——"

"I had no idea!" Eric cried. "And I stared at you for an hour on end—trying to count your pulse by a watch without a second-hand. . . . But you've changed so! I used to catch sight of you before the war——"

"I've travelled a lot since then," she interrupted. "The whole way through Purgatory to Hell."

Eric tried to remember whether the war had robbed her of any one but Jim Loring.

"*Since* that day you've changed so much again."

"Perhaps I'm taking a holiday from Hell. And, as you know, I'm not a good traveller."

He let down the window and threw away the end of his cigarette.

"I thought you were going to die that day," he murmured half to himself. "When I handed you over to your maid. . . . Lady Barbara, why don't you take a little more care of yourself?"

"D'you think I should be missed?"

"I can well imagine—— Here! He's going wrong!"

The carriage had overshot Berkeley Street; but, as Eric leaned towards the open window, Barbara caught him suddenly by the wrist and shoulder until she had turned him to face her.

"Where d'you live?" she demanded peremptorily; and, when he had told her, "Put your head out and tell him to go there."

"But we're almost in Berkeley Square now."

"Do as I tell you! I'm coming to pay you a call."

He disengaged her hands and lay back in his corner.

"It's a little late for you to be calling on me," he said.

With a quick tug and push she had opened the window on her own side before he could stop her.

"Oh, will you drive to 89 Ryder Street first, please," he heard her say. Then she sank back with a pursed-up smile of triumph. "I've *no* intention of going to bed yet," she explained.

"I've no intention of opening the door till I've taken you home," he rejoined.

She made no answer till the carriage drew up opposite his flat.

"It would be deplorable if you made a scene on the pavement," she observed carelessly.

Then she stepped out and told the driver to go back to Belgrave Square for Mrs. O'Rane.

It was a moon-lit night between half-past eleven and twelve. Ryder Street had roused to life with a widely-spaced but steady stream of men returning to bed from Pall Mall and sparing the fag-end of their attention for the unexpected tall girl who stood wrapped in a long silk shawl in the shadow of a bachelor door-way. The brougham turned round and drove away. Eric lighted another cigarette.

"Am I right in thinking that you're being obstinate?" Barbara enquired after some moments of silence.

"If you want me to take you home, I'll take you home. Otherwise I shall leave you here, go round to the club, explain that I've lost my latch-key and get a bed there."

"You're almost oriental in your hospitality," she laughed.

"I've no hospitality to spare for a girl of twenty-two at this hour of the night."

She stretched out her arm to him. In observing the beauty of her slender, long fingers and the whiteness of her arm against the long fringe of the shawl, Eric forgot his guard. She twitched the cigarette from his lips and laughed

like a child, as she blew out a cloud of smoke. Cigarette, shawl and manner suddenly reminded him of Carmen.

"You're so conventional," she sighed.

Eric became suddenly irritable.

"Lady Barbara, you're behaving idiotically!" he cried. "I know you'd do anything for a new sensation, but I'm not going to help. Possibly I'm old-fashioned. If you think——"

"I'm so thirsty," she interrupted. "Have you any soda-water?"

"You're sure to find plenty in Berkeley Square."

"But you're *afraid* to give me any, afraid of being compromised?"

"I've too many things to be afraid of without bothering about that. Lady Barbara, you've several brothers, I've one sister. If one of your brothers saw fit to invite *my* sister to a bachelor flat——"

"But you *haven't* invited me!"

"I should horsewhip him," Eric resumed jerkily.

She considered him curiously with her head on one side.

"You know, I don't feel afraid of you," she told him. "I could trust you anywhere. You're not old enough to understand that yet, but you will."

"Then for the present it's irrelevant. Come along, Lady Barbara."

He advanced a step, but she only smiled at him without moving. Eric looked angrily round, but the stream of passers-by, though sluggish, shewed no signs of drying up. A clock inside the hall began to chime midnight, and he turned on his heel. As he did so, a taxi turned into the street, and an officer climbed gingerly out and hoisted himself across the pavement on two crutches. Barbara coughed and drew her shawl round her until half her face was hidden.

"But, Eric dear, you can't have *lost* the key," she expostulated, purposefully clear.

Over the shawl her eyes were gleaming with mischief and triumph.

The officer looked quickly from one to the other.

"Hullo! You locked out?" he enquired sympathetically. "Rotten luck! Here, let me put you out of your misery! Hope you haven't been waiting long?"

"That is sweet of you," said Barbara. "Long? I seem to have been standing here all day. Come on, Eric; I'm frightfully tired; I want to sit down."

She walked into the hall, beckoning him with a jerk of her head. The officer bade them good-night and limped to a ground-floor flat at the end.

"I'm going to my club, Lady Barbara," said Eric with slow distinctness from the door-step.

"Then I shall bang on every door I see until I find your flat," she retorted promptly. "I've told you, I want some soda-water. And, Eric——"

"Yes, Lady Barbara."

"Eric, I always get what I want. Who lives here, do you suppose? We'll try his door first."

Eric came in and walked to the foot of the stairs. Barbara slipped her arm through his, but he shook it away.

"I'm tired," she explained. "I wish you wouldn't be so rough with me."

She replaced her arm, and, rather than engage in a childish brawl, Eric left it there, though the touch of her fingers on his wrist set his blood tingling. They walked slowly, for he was trying to set his racing thoughts in order. This, then, was the true Lady Barbara Neave. He had never believed the fantastic stories about her, but she was now gratuitously shewing him that she was of those who stopped at nothing.

He felt the sudden unpitiful disgust of a disappointed

idealist. She was very young, with expressions which made her wholly beautiful at times. . . . "Virginal" was the word he was trying to find. . . . He wondered how to rid himself of her without a scene.

"If you'll let go my arm, I'll open the door," he said with stiff patience.

She walked into the small inner hall and looked round her with unaffected interest.

"I've never been in a man's rooms before," she remarked and Eric knew that she was speaking the truth. An extraordinary sense of power came to him, rushing to his head. The tired eyes and wistful mouth, the haggard cheeks, the cloud of fine hair, the white arms and slender hands fed his hungry love of beauty. And he had attracted her until she lay at his mercy. . . .

"I want to see everything, Eric," she said gently.

He hardly heard the words; but her tone was confiding, and she slipped her hand into his. A latent sense of the dramatic came to his rescue.

"You seem to have put yourself pretty completely into my power," he observed, closing the front door behind them.

"I know you so much better than you know me," she answered.

"I don't quite follow."

She laughed gently to herself, then put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"No. . . . And you won't for years . . . not till I've educated you. . . . Am I right in thinking that you've forgotten all about my soda-water?"

Eric led her into the dining-room and gave her a tumbler of soda-water with a hand that trembled.

She had taken him by surprise as much as if she had struck him in the face. Incuriosity and fastidiousness, partly timid, partly romantic, had conspired to let him reach the age of two-and-thirty without ever kissing or being kissed. The act, now that he had experienced it, was nothing. A warm body, yielding in self-surrender, had pressed against him for a moment; two hands had impelled his head forward; he had been blinded for an instant by a scented billow of hair; then his cheeks had been touched as though a leaf had blown against them. That was the temperate analysis of kissing. . . .

"It's a nice room, Eric," she murmured, glancing slowly round over the top of her tumbler at the panelled walls and shining oak table. "And I like your invisible lighting. It's restful, and I hate a glare. What other rooms have you?"

"Kitchen next door," he answered with intentional abruptness; "then the servants' room—you won't make a noise, will you? or you'll wake them up. Bathroom, spare room, my own room, smoking-room. No, the limits of my unconventionality are soon reached; you can finish your soda-water in the smoking-room, and then I'll take you home."

"But I should *like* to see your room," she answered with the grave persistence of an unreasonable child. "Mine's purple and white in London—purple carpet, purple curtains, purple counterpane—and nothing but white—except the rose-wood, of course—at Crawleigh."

"This is the smoking-room," said Eric, conscientiously firm and unimpressed.

Barbara gave a little gasp of pleasure as he flooded the room with light. Book-cases surrounded three walls, stretching half-way to the ceiling and topped with rose-bowls and bronzes. The fourth was warmed by long *rose Du Barry* curtains over the two windows; between them

stood a Chippendale writing-table. The rest of the room was given up to an irregular circle of sofas and arm-chairs, white-covered and laden with *rose Du Barry* satin cushions, surrounding a second table.

"I *am* glad I came!" she cried. "You know how to make yourself comfortable, Eric! Of course, the first cigarette I drop on your adorable grey carpet—you see how it matches my dress?—the first cigarette spoils it for ever. *And the roses!*" With a characteristically impulsive jerk she dragged the tulle band and artificial flower from her hair, tossed them to Eric and stretched her hand up for a red rose to take their place. "Ah! beloved celibate! not a mirror in the room! I shall *have* to——"

"Please stay where you are, Lady Barbara."

She crammed the rose carelessly into her hair and dropped on the nearest sofa.

"*Do* take that coat off and sit down here!" she begged him.

"I'm waiting to take you home."

"But I'm not going home yet. I'm enjoying myself, I'm happy."

"I'm waiting to take you home," he repeated.

She pouted and glanced up at him through half-closed eyes.

"You don't care whether I'm happy or not. You're *soullessly* selfish!" She looked round and helped herself to a cigarette; then her hand crept invitingly, with the shy daring of a mouse, along the sofa. "I want a match."

Eric took the cigarette and replaced it in its box.

"Bed-time," he said. "This meeting was not of my contriving, Lady Barbara, and, when you've learned the meaning of words, you'll find that it won't affect your *happiness*——"

His flow was arrested by a startling gasp.

"Oh, it's no good!" Barbara cried. "You're hopeless, hopeless."

To his amazement she had sprung to her feet, angry and disfigured, forgetting to break through his guard, tossing her weapon away; no longer teasing, imperious or purposely reckless; and without one of her disarming lapses into simplicity. It was the mingled pain and anger of a flesh-wound clumsily reopened. The next moment she had collapsed on the sofa, stiffly upright, staring at him with hot eyes. Then the set cheeks and compressed lips relaxed like the scattering petals of a blown rose; her mouth drooped, her eyes half-closed, and she began to cry.

Eric looked in consternation at her puckered, pathetic face, suddenly colourless save for dark rings round the big, hollow eyes. Then he sat down and drew her to him, patting her hand and talking to her half as if she were a child, half as though she were capable of understanding his weighty diagnosis.

"Lady Barbara! Lady Barbara! Are you listening to me? You mustn't cry—*really*. . . . It takes away *all* your prettiness. Now, you were fairly hard on me at dinner, weren't you? But I do possess *some* intelligence; I didn't need to have Lady Poynter shouting from the house-top that you were ill. You're worn out, you ought to be in bed and you ought to stay there, instead of exciting yourself. Lady Barbara, *please* stop crying! I don't know what I said, but I'm very humbly sorry. Won't you stop?"

She stiffened herself with a jerk and smiled as abruptly.

"It was my fault. I've not been well and I've been very miserable. Give me a little kiss, Eric, to shew you're not angry with me."

She leaned forward and put her hands on his shoulders again.

"Why should I be angry with you?" he asked with a defensive laugh.

Her hands dropped into her lap.

"You won't kiss me?"

"What difference would it make?"

"I ask you to. What difference would it make to you?"

Eric fumbled industriously with a cigarette.

"It so happens that I've never kissed any one," he said, "except my mother and sister, of course." Then, as she sat hungrily reproachful, he repeated: "What *difference* would it make?"

"You wouldn't understand . . ." she sighed. "And yet I thought you would. Where did you get that tray from, Eric? You've never been to India, have you?"

"It was given me by an uncle of mine. Lady Barbara—If it will give you any satisfaction. . . ."

He kissed her forehead with shame-faced timidity and became discursively explanatory.

"The candle-sticks were looted during the Commune," he began hurriedly. "I was given them as a house-warming present. The clock . . ."

Barbara was wandering listlessly round the room and paying little attention to what he was saying. She explored the book-cases, ransacked the writing-table and looked curiously at the horse-shoe paper-weight.

"You can give this to me, Eric," she suggested over her shoulder.

"I'm afraid it was a present. Given me on my first night."

"It would still be a present, if you gave it to me. I had one, but I broke it. All my luck's left me since then. Are you superstitious?"

"Not—in—the—least! I keep this for associations and a toy. If I *could* bring out a play on Friday the thirteenth——"

"If you're not superstitious, there's no excuse for not giving it to me."

She tossed the horse-shoe into the air and caught it neatly with her right hand.

"I'll see if I can get you another one," he promised, "but I don't know whether they're made in England."

"It might make all the difference to me," she pleaded, catching the horse-shoe with her left hand. "It's only a toy to you—a child's toy."

Eric shook his head at her. Barbara pouted and threw the horse-shoe a third time into the air, bending forward to catch it behind her back as it dropped. Eric, watching apprehensively, saw a flash of apprehension reflected for an instant in her eyes; then there was a tinkle of broken glass.

"Oh, my *dear!* I wouldn't have done that for the world!" she cried, pressing her hands against her cheeks. "I've destroyed your luck now! What a fool I was! Abject fool!"

"What *does* it matter?" Eric laughed.

"I wouldn't have done that for the world," she repeated with a white face.

"And you're living in the year of grace nineteen-fifteen? It's only—What did we call it? A child's toy. And, between ourselves, it wasn't a very efficient paper-weight. I can assure you I shan't miss it."

"Perhaps you will some day. And then you'll lift up your hands and curse the hour when you first met me."

Eric looked complacently at the airy room, the crowded book-cases, the soft chairs, the bellying curtains and the neat pile of manuscript on his writing-table.

"Aren't you perhaps exaggerating your potential influence on my life?" he suggested.

Barbara went back to her sofa and helped herself to a cigarette without hurry or fear that this time it would be

taken from her; she smiled for a match—and smiled again when it was given her.

"Aren't you perhaps boasting too soon, my self-satisfied young friend? Your education's only just beginning."

Eric lighted a cigarette and sat down beside her. He no longer insisted that, for health or propriety, she must go home at once; and in some forgotten moment he had involuntarily taken off his overcoat.

"I wonder what you think you can teach me," he mused. "I wonder what you know, to start with."

"I know life."

"A considerable subject."

"I've had considerable experience."

The clock on the mantel-piece chimed one. Neither seemed to notice it, for Barbara was becoming autobiographical. Her story was ill-arranged and discursive, with personal characteristics of Lord Crawleigh sandwiched between her life at Government House, Ottawa, and a thwarted romance between her brother and a designing American. She flitted from her four years in India to Viceregal Lodge, Dublin, with a procession of damaging encounters with her father as stepping-stones in the narrative. (From her account it was Lord Crawleigh who sustained most of the damage.) He could never shake off a certain pro-consular manner in private life and had reduced his sons to blundering and untrustworthy *aides-de-camp* and his wife to a dignified but trembling squaw. Barbara alone resisted him.

"What can he do?" she asked. "He whipped me till I was ten, but I'm too big for that now. He can't very well lock me in my room, because the servants would leave in a body. They adore me. If he'd tried to stop my allowance, I should have gone on the stage—we've settled *that* point once and for all with Harry Manders, half-way through the stage-door of the Hilarity. Now I've got my

own money. Mind you, I *adore* father, and he adores me; most people adore me; but I must do what I like. *You* see that now; but I had to shew you, I had to break my way in here by main force."

Eric looked up in time to catch a glint in her eyes. It was unexpected and disconcerting. He had been imagining that she was merely over-indulged; but the glint warned him that Barbara would make a bad enemy, cruel perhaps and unscrupulous certainly. The next moment she was again like a child, grown haggard with fatigue; and he gave her a slice of cake and some milk, which she accepted obediently and with a certain surprised gratitude.

"Where d'you imagine all this is going to end?" he asked her, though the question was addressed more to himself. "You're twenty-two, you've been everywhere, seen everything, met everybody. You're utterly uncontrolled and so sated and restless that, rather than go to bed, you'll compromise yourself by sitting talking to me half the night in a bachelor flat."

"Poor Val Arden used to talk like that. He always called me Lady Lilith, because I was older than good and evil. I'm sorry Val's dead; he was such fun. 'In six years' time—one asks oneself the question. . . .' It wasn't 'rather than go to bed,' not altogether."

"It's a nervous disease," Eric interrupted shortly.

"Because I cried just now? I was very unhappy, Eric."

"My dear Lady Barbara, you live in superlatives. You don't know what happiness or unhappiness means. You were badly overwrought then, so you cried and said you were miserable."

She looked at him and raised her eyebrows without speaking.

"It's wonderful how wrong quite clever people can be," she said at length. "I *was* miserable, I *wanted* to be kissed, I was *hungry* for the smallest crumb of affection.

I wanted to be *happy*. . . . And you can only see me as neurotic. D'you feel you're a good judge?"

"Of happiness?"

Eric smiled complacently and again glanced lovingly round the room. Barbara sighed in pity and looked at her watch.

"I seem to have come in the way rather," she interrupted.

"The butterfly that settles on the railway track may be said, I suppose, to come in the way of a train. . . . I'm going to take you home now."

"You're not sorry I came? *I'm* not."

"It was worth while meeting you," he laughed.

As Eric struggled with the sleeves of his coat, she twined her arms round his neck. The scent of carnations was now faintly blended with the deeper fragrance of the single rose behind her ear.

"And you'd never kissed any one before," she whispered.

It was nearly day-light when they found themselves in the street. Two special constables, striding resonantly home, looked curiously at them; but Barbara had again pulled up her shawl until it covered half her face. Piccadilly was at the mercy of scavengers with glistening black waders and pitiless hoses; otherwise they seemed to have all London to themselves.

With a head aching from fatigue, Eric tried to reconstruct the fantastic evening. Little detached pictures jostled their unconvincing way through his brain—Lady Poynter's formal dining-room and the barren, self-conscious literary discussion; Lord Poynter's wheezing confidences about the wood port which should properly be taken as a liqueur. He saw again the bridge-table with Gaymer, neat, immaculate and repellent, calling in a high nasal voice for Barbara to rejoin them. The drive home was a blank until he was galvanized by her leaning through the window and

directing the coachman to Ryder Street. Thereafter facts gave place to emotions, and the other emotions to an incredulous elation that Barbara Neave should have thrown herself at his feet. Perhaps, of course, she was only emotion-hunting. . . . But she had lain at his mercy. . . . Perhaps that, too, was an emotion to be wooed, enjoyed and recorded. Any one less artificial could at least be glad that they were passing out of each other's life, as they had come into it, without expectation or regret.

"You'd better not come any farther," she advised him, as they reached the end of Berkeley Street. "If anybody *should* be awake and looking out of the window . . ."

He nodded and held out his hand.

"You have your latch-key?"

"Yes, thanks. Good-night, Eric."

"Good-bye, Lady Barbara."

"Between men on the Stock Exchange it is a platitude that you can only get a price in selling what some one else wants to buy; between men and women outside the Stock Exchange this is often considered a paradox." From the diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER TWO

LADY BARBARA NEAVE

"CONSTANTINE: From seventeen to thirty-four . . . the years which a man should consecrate to the acquiring of political virtue . . . wherever he turns he is distracted, provoked, tantalised by the bare-faced presence of woman. How's he to keep a clear brain for the larger issues of life? . . . Women haven't morals or intellect in our sense of the words. They have other incompatible qualities quite as important, no doubt. But shut them away from public life and public exhibition. It's degrading to compete with them . . . it's as degrading to compete for them. . . ."

GRANVILLE BARKER: "THE MADRAS HOUSE."

I

THE latest, costliest and most ingenious mechanical device in Eric's bedroom was an electric dial and switch-board communicating with the kitchen and so constructed that, by moving a clock-hand, the corresponding dial abandoned the non-committal elusiveness of "*Please call me at—*" for "*Please call me at 8.00 (or 9.00 or 9.30).*" There was something calculatedly dissolute about the invention (which cost £17.10 and had struck work four times in three weeks). After a long night of work or frolic, the sybarite moved the hand on for twelve hours—his last conscious act before collapsing into bed; if, again, he had retired early or were so much debauched that he could not sleep, he wearily set the hand for "*Please call me now.*"

Eric looked with smarting eyes first at the luminous clock, then at the dial. Half-past five, coupled with "*Please call me at eight.*" He undressed ruminatively, reheated his hot-water can at the gas-ring, methodically folded his clothes, smoothed his trousers away in their press, selected a suit

for the following day, washed face and hands, brushed teeth and hoisted himself into bed. The dial must stand as he had left it. Lady Barbara Neave had come—and gone; she was not going to disturb his work.

His sleep seemed to be interrupted almost instantly by the arrival of a maid with tea, rusks, letters and *The Times*. His head was hot, but he was singularly untired; that would come later.

His letters varied little from day to day; two appeals for free sittings with Bond Street photographers; four receipts; one bill; a dignified protest from a country clergyman who had been shocked by the line: "Oh, you're not sending me down with *that* woman, Rhoda? She's God's first and most *perfect* bore." There was an ill-written request for leave to translate his play into French, three news-cuttings to herald his new play, a conventional letter from his mother, two petitions for free stalls from impecunious friends and nine invitations to luncheon or dinner. He had hardly finished reading them, when a pencilled note, sent by hand from Mrs. Shelley, made the tenth.

Eric piled his correspondence under the butter-dish to await his secretary's arrival and turned methodically to *The Times*. Half-an-hour later he rang for his housekeeper and subjected her book to scrutiny. A leather-bound journal with a snap-lock lay on his table, and he next wrote his diary for the previous day. "*So to dinner—rather late—with Lady Poynter to meet her nephew, Capt. Gaymer (R. F. C.). Mrs. O'Rane (as beautiful as ever, but too voluble for my taste), Mrs. Shelley and Lady Barbara Neave. Meredithian debate on wine with Lord P., which I would give anything to put into a play. Bridge; but I cut out.*" He hesitated and drummed with his fingers on the thick creamy pages. "*Took Lady B. home rather late and circuitously.*"

Then his secretary knocked and settled herself on the edge of an arm-chair.

"Good-morning," Eric began. "Will you write first of all to the manager of the bank——"

The telephone rang with a dull drone at the foot of his bed, and the girl made tentative movements of discreet departure.

"No, you deal with this!" Eric cried. "Out of London. You're not sure when I shall be back. Can you take a message?"

The girl picked up the instrument, while Eric glanced again through his letters.

"Hullo! Yes. Yes. He's—away, I'm afraid. . . . But, you see, he's *away*. . . ." She looked despairingly at Eric. "He's *awa-ay!*" Then breathlessly she clapped the receiver back.

"It was Lady Barbara Somebody; I couldn't hear the surname. She said you weren't away and she *must* speak to you. I thought it was best——"

Eric had to collect himself before answering. In the sane cold light of early morning the overnight escapade was a draggled, unromantic bit of folly. If he met Barbara again, he would make things as easy as possible: there would be no allusions, no sly smiles; the whole thing was to be forgotten. And yet she was already digging it from under the lightly sprinkled earth. If she were throwing herself on his mercy, it was unnecessary; he had said "Good-bye . . ." very distinctly. And she must surely know that she need not beg him not to talk. . . .

"You were quite right," he told his secretary. "Where were we? Oh, the manager——"

The bell rang again. Eric frowned and picked up the receiver, while the girl, after a moment's hesitation, tiptoed out of the room. Barbara had already disturbed his time-table for thirty seconds. . . .

"Hullo? Mr. Lane is away at present," he said. There

was a pause. "I told you yesterday, Lady Barbara. Just as when you say 'Not at home.' . . . I'm exceedingly busy and I *must* have a few days to myself. Good-bye."

The constant factor in her overnight autobiography was that every one had always done what Barbara wanted; but, if she fancied that she was going to break into a working-day with any of her nonsense, she would be disappointed.

At the other end of the line a gentle, rather tired voice said:

"Don't cut me off. If you *know* the trouble I've had to get hold of you! Eric, why aren't you in the book? Another device for escaping your adorers? I've been pursuing you round London for a good half-hour; then your people at the theatre——"

"Is it anything *important?*" he interrupted curtly.

"It's very important that you should listen *most* politely and carefully and patiently and attentively when I'm talking to you. So far you haven't asked how I am, you haven't told me how you are——"

"I've *suggested* that I'm very busy," he interrupted her again.

"But I don't allow that sort of thing to stand in the way."

"And *I* don't allow any one to break into my time. Good-bye——"

"Eric, don't you dare ring me off! I want to know whether you'll lunch here to-day. I've collected rather an amusing party."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Where *are* you lunching? At home? Then you can certainly come. . . . I don't care *who's* lunching with you: . . . If you don't—Well, you'll see. In the meantime, has Marion Shelley invited you to dine to-night and are you going?"

"Yes, to the first; no, to the second," Eric answered. "Lady Barbara——"

"It must be 'yes' to the second, too, dear Eric. I rang her up at cock-crow to say that you wanted her to invite us together. You do, you know; you want to see whether last night's impression was true; that's why I asked you to lunch. . . . Now I want to know if you've a rehearsal to-day, because, if so——"

"Lady Barbara, I am going to cut you off," said Eric distinctly.

He hung up the receiver and was about to ring for his secretary, when his memory was arrested by the picture of Barbara springing to her feet, reviling him, collapsing on the sofa and bursting into tears. "Bully her, and she cries," he murmured impatiently. "Don't bully her, and she bullies you. I'm not cut out for the part of tame cat. Another forty-eight hours, and she'll expect me to drive round London and look at dresses with her. . . ." But if his petulance had made her cry again . . . Eric hunted for a pen and, without involving himself in delicacies of address, wrote—"I am not discourteous by preference, but you drive me to it. *La comedia è finita.*" He left the note unsigned and asked his secretary to have it sent by hand to Berkeley Square. When it had left him past recall, he felt that he could have done better; and he knew that he would have done best of all by not writing. . . . But he was irritated by her too insistent unconventionality; irritated and yet rawly elated by his ascendancy over her.

His secretary returned, and he dictated to her until half-past nine struck. It was his signal to get up so that he could be dressed by ten, so that he could work from ten till one, so that he could walk out and lunch at one-thirty, observing his time-table punctually.

The telephone rang again, and Mrs. Shelley enquired tonelessly whether he had received her invitation.

"Oh, Eric! I *did* hope you could come!" she exclaimed.

"Can't you reconsider? Poor Babs seems so anxious to see you again."

Mrs. Shelley, then, had the wit to guess where the initiative lay.

"I'm afraid that the privilege of gratifying Lady Barbara's whims——"

He forgot how he had meant to finish the sentence, and there was a pause.

"Don't you like her, Eric?" asked Mrs. Shelley. "Most people fall a victim the first time they meet her."

"I've outgrown the susceptible age," he laughed. "And, anyway, I'm working. It's awfully kind of you to invite me, Mrs. Shelley——"

"Eric, I wish you'd reconsider," she interrupted before he could repeat his refusal. "I feel you'll be doing her a kindness by coming; you amused her and turned her thoughts. . . . I was dreadfully distressed last night; she looked as if she were going into a decline. . . ."

In contrast to Mrs. Shelley's toneless voice Eric heard again Barbara's abrupt, startling cry, "You're hopeless, hopeless!"—just before she collapsed limply on the sofa and cried about something which she would not explain. . . .

"You make it impossible for me to refuse," he said with an uneasy laugh.

"I'm so grateful! I *knew* you'd come, Eric."

He threw back the bed-clothes and rang for his bath.

"I suppose Lady Barbara will think *she* knew I was coming, too," he said to himself. "I don't mind being made a fool of *once*. . . ."

At noon he tidied his papers and lighted a cigarette while he waited for a call from his agent. The "Divorce" was being produced in America; and for an arid, perplexing half-hour Mr. Grierson, with eyes half-closed in the grey

smoke of his cigar, pushed cables, letters, copies and a draft agreement across the table.

"Stay and have some lunch," Eric suggested, as half-past twelve struck. "Manders is due any time now. He wants me to make certain alterations in the 'Bomb-Shell,' and you can keep me in countenance. I'm getting rather tired of being told: 'Of course, with great respect, Lane, you're a new-comer to the theatre. . . .' New-comer I may be, but it doesn't lie in Manders' mouth to say so, if he'll trouble to calculate how many thousands I've put in his pocket. . . . Isn't this the sort of time when one has a cocktail?"

Grierson's eyes lighted up at the suggestion, and Eric rang for ice. He was in the middle of his preparations when Harry Manders entered in a suit of light tweeds, clutching a flat-brimmed bowler hat in one hand and a leather-topped cane in the other.

"'Mornin', Eric. Hullo, Phil! Sinister combination for a poor devil of an actor-manager—author *and* agent. What's this you're givin' me? Well, only up to the top—On my honour, boy, only up to the top!" He nodded over the brimming glass with a knowing "Well, chin-chin!" and subsided diagonally into a chair with his legs across one arm.

"I thought Grierson's age and experience might save my play from further amateur surgery," Eric explained.

"Tootaloo," chirped Manders resiliently and dragged a crumpled script from his pocket. Eric's obstinate assurance would have exasperated any other manager, but, as Manders wearily said, "I've been too long at the game to lose my temper."

With that they settled to work and argued their way through the marked passages of Manders' copy heatedly and without reaching conviction or agreement. Once Grierson rose and shook a second cocktail; twice a maid

announced that luncheon was on the table. Something, which he attributed to his broken night, made Eric unreasonable to a point where he knew that he was being unreasonable. He was too tired for anything except sustained obstinacy, and his companions grated on him.

"Oh, let's have something to eat!" he exclaimed at length. "The second act's got to stand as I wrote it. We shan't do any good by talking. . . ."

"Now don't you be in a hurry, boy," began Manders. "*Turn* back to the beginning. . . ."

Eric looked at his watch.

"Don't forget we've a rehearsal," he said. "I don't know what there is for lunch, but it will be tepid."

"Then let's wait for it to get cold. Now, in the first act you said—Damn!"

He flapped the script impatiently on his knee as the now familiar knock of Eric's parlour-maid was heard yet again.

"Lady Barbara Neave to see you, sir," she whispered a little breathlessly.

"Will you please say that I can't possibly see any one?" Eric answered curtly. "Tell her that two gentlemen have come to see me on business. Ask her to leave a message."

He turned to find Manders smiling, as though to say, "Why didn't you tell us? *We* should have understood. We're men of the world."

"The *first* act," Eric repeated earnestly. "*As* you will, but do go ahead with it. I want some lunch."

For five seconds the three men turned the limp, dog's-eared pages until they had found the place. Manders cleared his throat unreservedly and then looked up with an expression of ebbing patience, as the door opened again. This time there was no knock, and Lady Barbara walked in after hesitating for a moment on the threshold to identify Eric. She was wearing a black dress with a transparent film of grey hanging from the shoulders, a black

hat shaped like a butterfly's wings with her hair visible through the spider's web crown. One hand swung a sable stole, the other carried to and from her mouth a half-eaten apple.

"Eric, *please* invite me to lunch with you!" she begged. "You've such delicious food. I was shewn into your dining-room and I could hardly resist it. There's a dressed crab—I behaved *perfectly*, I didn't touch it—and, if all three of you had the weeniest little bit less, there'd be enough for us all. Hullo, there's Mr. Manders!"

She shook hands and waited for Eric to introduce Grierson.

"You're interrupting an important discussion, Lady Barbara."

"Is it about your new play? Oh, then I can help! But, if you knew how hungry I was——"

"They're expecting you to lunch at home," Eric interrupted. "You told me you had a party."

"But I've just telephoned to say that I've been invited to lunch here! I've burnt your boats. Father was perfectly furious, because mother's lunching with Connie Maitland, and he counted on me to see him through."

As she smiled at Eric with her head on one side, he realized that work was over for the morning.

"I daresay there will be enough for four," he answered.

"Then for goodness' sake let's begin before any one else turns up unexpectedly!" she cried, catching him by the sleeves and drawing him to the door.

Grierson and Manders smiled and followed them, carefully brushing cigar-ash from their clothes and smoothing the back of their hair.

Elation battled with annoyance in Eric's mind throughout luncheon. Barbara had sought him out, when a hun-

dred other men—several of them, like George Oakleigh, undisguisedly in love with her—might have been preferred to him; but he was offended by her proprietary attitude towards his work and life. Manders would have the whole story, too, helped out with first-rate mimicry, running through the Thespian Club by dinner-time; it would spread in twenty-fours through all of the London that knew him and half of the London that knew her; and Eric Lane would be quoted as the latest foil or companion in the latest Barbara Neave story. One did not even want the girl to be made a peg for Manders' wit. . . .

The luncheon, Eric observed morosely, was cheaply successful, for Barbara talked with barely concealed desire to lay Grierson and Manders under her spell. By intuition or accident she gave them what tickled their interest most keenly—intimate stories about herself or her friends, the proved history of what to them had hitherto been but alluring gossip, anecdotes of Government House and the minor secrets and scandals of her father's three terms of office. Eric felt that it was a *little* below the dignity of a girl, who was after all the daughter of a distinguished former viceroy, to be discussing herself and her friends so freely. . . .

They had lost count of time when Grierson looked furtively at his watch and jumped apologetically to his feet. As he hurried out of the room Barbara again asked Eric whether he had a rehearsal that day.

"Because I want to come," she explained wheedlingly, with her head on one side.

Her eyes were dark and tired after her overnight excitement; she had exhausted herself with talking; and for a moment Eric forgot to be irritated and only saw her as a child whom it would be ungracious to disappoint. Then he remembered one phase of a rambling story in which her love of getting her own way had caused her cavalier of

the day to wait in his car from midnight until six because she had forgotten to leave a message that she had already gone home. In the story Eric could not remember any apology from Barbara. Triumphs came so quickly and easily that she expected everything and valued nothing; a man was sufficiently rewarded by being allowed to fall in love with her. . . .

"I'm afraid rehearsals aren't open to the public," he told her, brusquely enough to dismiss the appeal, he hoped, but not so brusquely as to hurt her.

She looked at him with the glint of defiance which he had seen once before; then she turned to Manders.

"Please, I want to come to the rehearsal," she begged. "It's your theatre, Mr. Manders."

"It's my play," Eric interrupted.

She turned her head long enough to say:

"I was asking Mr. Manders."

"But it happens that I also——"

Manders intervened with a clucking noise of the tongue.

"Keep the ring, keep the ring!" he cried. "You got out o' bed the wrong side, Eric boy. Don't quarrel, do-ant quarrel! If Lady Barbara wants to come, let her! It's against the rules, but I'll make an exception for her." The girl rewarded him with a glowing smile. "You'll be bored, my dear, I warn you."

"Oh, if I am, I can talk to Eric."

"Look here, Manders, if a rehearsal's worth taking at all, it's worth taking seriously," cried Eric petulantly. "I've plenty of other use for my time."

Manders was faintly amused by the outburst and wholly unmoved. Dire experience of the jealous and irascible had taught him that he could not afford to let other people lose their tempers.

"Lady Barbara will promise not to talk," he prophesied. "We're late, boy."

"I shall talk afterwards," she warned them. "At dinner to-night—Mr. Manders, I can't get Eric to see what bad plays he writes and what good plays he might turn out. He's very funny about it."

"Authors are a rum lot!" said Manders jocosely, slapping Eric's shoulder. "See about a taxi, boy. I don't let my people keep me waiting and I don't want them to wait for me."

It was a defeat for Eric, formally recorded by Barbara with that glint of triumph which was beginning to fill him with misgiving. They drove in silence to a side street off Shaftesbury Avenue and groped their way through the stage-door down a cork-screw staircase and along several short passages which branched disconcertingly to right or left as soon as Barbara fancied that she could walk ahead with impunity. From above came the mechanical runs and flourishes of a piano-organ against the drone of traffic; somewhere below there was a rapid squeak of voices. The corridors and stairs were wrapped in warm darkness, and, after one stumble, Eric felt a hand running down his sleeve and twining round his fingers.

"Are you angry with me?" Barbara whispered. "You were so *grumpy* in the taxi. And I made such a success of your lunch. Mr. Manders and Mr. Grierson loved me, and I made even you smile."

Eric tried to locate Manders in the velvety darkness before replying.

"You were very amusing," he answered unenthusiastically. "But it's possible to be amusing even when you're making rather a nuisance of yourself to several *very* busy men."

A sigh fluttered wistfully through the darkness, and he felt her drawing closer to him.

"Aren't you a *little* bit brutal, Eric?"

"Don't you find every one brutal who doesn't fetch and

carry and wait out in the snow for you all night—and give you material for new stories? . . . Stand still while I find the handle.”

He led her through a studded iron door into the twilight auditorium. The stalls were swathed in holland covers, and there was a brooding warm desolation which invited undertones. Barbara looked with growing interest at a sprawling group of two men and three women on the stage. Without make-up they were white and featureless in the glare of the foot-lights; they were jaded and a little impatient, too, but Manders, who seemed to make his personality unyielding and metallic on entering a theatre, galvanized them into alertness. A wooden platform had been built over the middle of the orchestra; and, as soon as he had disposed of Barbara in the stalls, Eric mounted it and seated himself in an arm-chair. Manders cautiously squeezed past him, script in hand, to the stage; there was a preliminary cough, a cry of “Beginners, please!” and the rehearsal opened.

Eric allowed the first act to be played without interruption; at the end he jumped up and entered into whispered conversation with Manders, turning the leaves of the manuscript and tapping them impressively with his pencil. One player after another emerged from the wings and stood listening, nodding and discussing as each point was thrashed out. A few minutes later Manders came down into the stalls and sat by Barbara.

“Just a breather,” he explained. “No good nagging your people, particularly when they’ve been at the job for years and you’re a new-comer. . . . Some of my spoiled darlings find that a little Eric goes a long way. You’re sure you’re not bored, my dear?”

“I can’t *see* very well,” Barbara answered. “If I had a chair on the little platform——”

Manders wasted an unseen wink on her.

"Well, you mustn't talk to Eric, that's all. And, if you see you're making him nervous, you must run away."

He helped her up and accommodated her with a property foot-stool by Eric's chair, leaving her for a moment's resentful scrutiny by a young woman who had been arguing with winsome persuasiveness about a speech which Eric under pressure from Manders had consented to cut.

"Who's that, Eric?" Barbara whispered, as he settled into place.

"Mabel Elstree."

"H'm. She doesn't seem to like my being here. . . . Does *everybody* call you Eric?"

"You're well placed to answer that. Now, Lady Barbara, remember your promise: no talking!"

The act was played a second time, taking form and life as all warmed to their work. Eric watched with critical narrowed eyes, no longer scattering pencil-marks in the margin of the script, restrained, impassive and absorbed. Barbara sat with her hands clasped round her ankles and her head resting against his knee. Only when the act was ended did he seem to become aware of her; then he edged away and stood up.

"Better! Very much better! Just turn to the place where——" He rustled back into the middle of the act and had it played through to the curtain.

Half-an-hour later Barbara emerged into sunshine. Eric was tired and rather husky, but pleased and hopeful. His earlier irritability was forgotten save when it obtruded itself reproachfully to remind him that he had been scanty civil to the girl by his side.

"The next thing is a taxi," he murmured, as they came out into Shaftesbury Avenue.

"You wouldn't dream of taking me home and offering me some tea?" she suggested.

"I would not, Lady Barbara," he answered cheerfully.

"Your practice of visiting young unmarried men in their rooms should be promptly checked. But I'll drop you in Berkeley Square, if you like."

"That would be more—respectable. It's curious how you seem to have made up your mind not to do anything I ask you."

"It doesn't seem to make much difference to the result."

She ceased pouting and smiled self-confidently for a moment. Then her assurance left her, and she slipped her arm timidly through his.

"Am I being a nuisance, Eric? You said so, and—oh, it *did* hurt! I honestly enjoyed myself this afternoon; and I wasn't so very much in the way, was I? Don't you like me to enjoy myself? Don't you like to see me happy? Are you sure you're not a little bit sorry you were so brutal to me?"

"My conscience is quite easy, thanks. Lady Barbara——"

He hesitated and felt himself flushing.

"Yes?"

"Lady Barbara—, I don't understand you, I don't begin to understand you."

"You won't write a good play till you do," she laughed. "All your women are romantic dolls. We're much better and much worse than you think. But that wasn't what you started to say."

"I know. . . . Well, you oughtn't to have come to my rooms last night. And you oughtn't to have come to-day, though that wasn't as bad. . . . What d'you imagine people like Grierson or Manders think? What d'you imagine Mabel Elstree thinks, when you sit with your head against my knee?"

She withdrew her arm and walked for some time without speaking.

"I'm sorry if I'm compromising you with your friends," she said at length.

"And whether you compromise yourself doesn't matter?"

"I suppose I'm used to it," she sighed; then, with one of her April changes, the sigh turned into a provocative laugh. "If *you* don't mind being compromised by *me*, I'd make you write a *wonderful* play. My technique's so good. All you have to do is to fall in love with me——"

"I shan't have the opportunity," he interrupted. "We meet to-night at Mrs. Shelley's——"

"And we were so *positive* that we weren't going!" she murmured. "You don't want to see me again?"

Eric hailed a passing taxi.

"I like meeting you," he told her frankly enough. "You amuse me—and you interest me enormously. But I've work to do . . . for one thing. . . ."

She seated herself in the taxi and held out her hand through the window.

"You might come and call for me to-night," she suggested.

Eric shook his head. He was shy of entering a house to which he had not been officially admitted, confronting a strange butler, being pushed into a room to wait for her, meeting and explaining himself to Lord Crawleigh or one of the brothers, who would look superciliously at "Babs' latest capture." . . .

"I'll meet you at Mrs. Shelley's," he said.

The hand was withdrawn, and he could see her biting her lip.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"There's no need to be."

"I was apologizing to myself—for giving you *another* opportunity of refusing something I asked you to do for me."

Eric walked back to his flat, puzzled and irritated. The

girl was intolerably spoiled; nothing that you did was right, there was altogether too much wear and tear in trying to adapt yourself to her moods. . . .

Even if you wanted to. . . .

3

The rehearsal, despite Barbara, was over in good time, and Eric could lie unhurriedly in his bath without fear of being late for Mrs. Shelley's dinner. Two days of his holiday had already slipped away, and he had made little mark on the work which he had schemed to do. To-morrow he would start in earnest. . . .

Barbara. . . . He could not remember what had set him thinking about her. She looked desperately ill, but that was not his fault, nor could he cure her; which disposed of Barbara. . . . What she needed was some one who would pull her up, steady her, master her. . . . Unfortunately—for her—he could not spare the time; nor was it part of his scheme of life to effect her physical and moral regeneration. . . . And it was now the moment to begin dressing.

Mrs. Shelley's house lay between Sloane Square and the river; and Eric arrived punctually to find her insipidly grateful to him for coming. A self-conscious Chelsea party was assembling; there were two war-poets, whose "Trench Songs" and "Emancipation," compensating want of finish with violence of feeling, had made thoughtless critics wonder whether the Great War would engender a new Elizabethan splendour of genius; there was Mrs. Manisty, who claimed young poets as of right and helped them to parturition in the pages of the *Utopia Review*; there was a flamboyant, short-haired young woman who had launched on the world a war-emergency code of sex-morals under the guise of a novel; there were three bashful aliens sus-

pected of being pianists and one self-assured journalist who told Mrs. Shelley with suitable heartiness that he had not *met* Mr. Lane, but of course he knew his *work* and went on to ask Eric if he was engaged on a new "work." The flamboyant woman, Eric observed, talked much of "creation" and its antecedent labour; the trench poets, with professional modesty, referred to their "stuff." A fourth alien entered and was greeted and introduced in halting French, to which he replied in rapid and faultless English.

Eric looked round on a triumph of ill-assortment. He came here partly out of old friendship for his hostess, but chiefly for fear of seeming to avoid a section of society which at least took itself seriously. There was no question of a Byronic descent on Chelsea; these people would ever cringe before the face of success and disparage behind its back, as they had always done; they made a suburb and called it a school. For ten years Eric had listened to their theories and discoveries; after ten years he was still waiting for achievement. The very house, with its "art" shades of upholstery, its hammered brass fenders, its wooden nooks and angles filled with ramshackle book-cases, hard seats and inadequately stuffed cushions, was artificial; it was make-believe, pretentious, insincere. . . .

"Lady Barbara Neave."

There was a rustle of excitement, the more noticeable against the conscientious effort of several not to seem interested. Eric smiled to himself, as the young journalist, interrupted in his discourse on "the aristocracy of illiterates," watched Barbara's entry and posed himself for being introduced. She looked round with slow assurance, fully conscious of the lull in conversation and of the eyes that were taking stock of her. Eric felt an artistic admiration for her way of silently dominating a room.

"Am I late, dear Marion?" she asked, with the smile of startled recognition which made men and women anxious

to throw protecting arms round her thin shoulders. "Eric and I have been rehearsing our play—the new one, I mean, that I'm taking in hand—and I had such a lot to do when I got home." She displayed adequate patience, while Mrs. Shelley completed her introductions, and then crossed to Eric's corner. "Glad to see me again?" she whispered. "I've decided that you're to lunch with us on Saturday."

"And I've decided to gladden the hearts of my family by going down to Winchester," he answered.

"But you must go later. I'll come with you, if you'll find a practicable train; I'm going to Crawleigh. Say you'd like to travel down with me."

"I make a practice of sleeping in the train," he answered.

"You won't on Saturday. Sometimes, Eric, I find your little practices and habits and rules rather tiresome; I must educate you out of them. By the way, I want to be seen home to-night."

It was a disappointing dinner for Eric, as, after coming to gratify Barbara, he was separated from her by the length of the table. In conversation Mrs. Shelley always gave people what was good for them rather than what they liked; Barbara was accordingly set next to an art editor, who tried to wheedle from her an article on "Eastern Decoration in Western Houses," while Eric found himself sandwiched without hope of escape between Mrs. Manisty, who discussed poetry which he had not read, and the flamboyant novelist, who had lately discovered and insisted on exposing a mutual-admiration ring in the novel-reviewers of the London press.

If dull, the meal was at least not so embarrassing as his dinner of the night before with Lady Poynter. Barbara seemed chilled by uncongenial company, though she touched his hand on her way to the door and turned, with patent consciousness that she was being watched, to give him a parting smile. Mrs. Manisty also turned, before she

could control her curiosity, to see for whom the smile was intended. And, as Eric threw away his match after lighting a cigar, he found two of the men smiling.

In the absence of a host to pull them together, six groups self-consciously set themselves to discover a subject of conversation more worthy of their steel than either the evening *communiqué* or the port. The three alien pianists had reduced themselves to a Polish sculptor, an Irish novelist and a Scottish portrait-painter. By sitting next to the journalist, Eric saved himself the effort of talking and recuperated at leisure after the exhausting boredom of dinner. He had looked forward to seeing Barbara again, feeling disappointment that she was not in the big shadowy drawing-room when he arrived—(but she would come any moment)—and a little proprietary thrill of pleasure when she walked straight across the room to him. But her manner, her use of his Christian name—(and Mrs. Shelley knew that they had first met less than twenty-four hours ago)—her clear-voiced, unabashed habit of flirtation, the parting smile at the door. . . .

One of his neighbours interrupted the ill-humoured train of thought by introducing himself in a pleasant, soft brogue.

"Er, me name's Sullivan, Mr. Lane. Ye know Priestley, I expect? Priestley and I have been concocting a great scheme. I have a new book coming out in the spring and I'm wanting a girl's head for the frontispiece. Well, since I saw Lady Barbara to-night, there's only one head that will do for me. And Priestley's the one man to do it. Charcoal, ye know; a single sitting would be enough. Do ye think she would be willing?"

Eric smiled to hide his impatience.

"Why not ask her?" he suggested. "She's fairly well-known, of course; everybody'd recognize it."

"Ah, don't distress yourself! The book's symbolical,"

Sullivan explained vaguely. "I was wondering now, would ye sound her? Priestley and I don't know her, ye see. And, as ye're a friend——"

"We'll ask her, when we get upstairs," Eric answered.

Three tentative chords broke the silence overhead, and a woman's voice began to sing.

"*Butterfly*," the journalist jerked out as though he were in the last heat of a competition. "Second act, isn't it? Where Madame Butterfly hears that Pinkerton's ship has been sighted. I never think *Butterfly's* as bad as some of the high-brows try to make out. If you *like* that sort of thing, I mean," he added prudently.

Eric held up his hand.

"Please! I want to hear this."

"One fine day, we'll notice
A thread of smoke arising on the sea
In the far horizon,
And then the ship appearing:—
Then the trim white vessel
Glides into the harbour, thunders forth her cannon.
See you? He is coming!—
I do not go to meet him. Not I. I stay
Upon the brow of the hillock and wait, and wait
For a long time, but never weary
Of the long waiting.
From out the crowded city,
There is coming a man—
A little speck in the distance, climbing the hillock.
Can you guess who it is?
And when he's reached the summit
Can you guess what he'll say?
He will call '*Butterfly*' from the distance.
I, without answering,
Hold myself quietly concealed,
A bit to tease him, and a bit so as not to die
At our first meeting: and then, a little troubled,
He will call, he will call:
'Dear baby-wife of mine, dear little orange-blossom!'
The names he used to call me when he came here. . . ."

Eric had allowed his cigar to go out. He lighted it again and turned to his neighbour with an apology, as the voice ceased and then seemed to revive with a last sob of ecstasy.

"She did that very well. Shall we go upstairs? I should like some more. We can take our cigars with us."

Without waiting for an answer, he made for the door and hurried ahead of the others. The drawing-room was sombrely lighted by three low standard lamps which threw the upper half of the room into shadow. He stood for several moments with lips parted and shining eyes, trying to identify three scattered couples of women before reducing the figure at the piano, by elimination, to Barbara.

"I say, was that you?" he demanded.

She made way for him at her side, welcoming him with a chastened smile and wondering at his sudden enthusiasm.

"Did you like it? I'm so glad. I was beginning to think you were a craftsman, but I believe you're an artist. . . . I'm full of accomplishments, Eric. Pity, isn't it, that in *spite* of it all——?"

She hesitated, wistfully provocative.

"What's a pity?" he asked.

"What you were thinking; that I am *what* I am."

"I wasn't thinking that," he answered dreamily. "I was wondering if you'd sing again. We couldn't hear you at all downstairs——"

"Enough to bring you up very quickly?"

He sighed with exasperation.

"Yes, if your vanity needs a sop. Was that why you sang?"

She shook her head at him wearily, and he saw undried tears on her cheeks.

"Marion just asked me to sing. It was either that or talking to Yolande Manisty, and I hate her. What would you like me to sing?"

Eric felt ashamed of his rasping harshness.

"I don't know. That particular song always makes me cry. In spite of that," he looked at her and smiled to himself. "No, I'm going to be very self-sacrificing. You said you wanted me to take you home, and I will—if you'll come at once."

"But it's not half-past nine yet."

"I don't care. My dear child, d'you think I can't see that you're tired, ill, over-excited——"

"It makes the night so long, Eric! But—thank you! I was beginning to think you were a prig, but I believe you're a saint!" The wistfulness left her eyes, and she smiled mischievously. "In moments of emotion how all our habits and practices break down! 'My dear child,' 'My dear child,' 'D'you think I can't see?' 'My dear child,' 'Tired, ill, over-excited.'"

"I'm sorry, Lady Barbara."

He tried to rise, but she pulled him back.

"You baby! Can't I make fun of you *ever*? It meant so much—just that little change in your voice when you forgot to be inhuman. I prefer 'dear child' to 'Lady Barbara' any day. Do you find it so hard to be affectionate, Eric?"

"I haven't tried. It would be impossible with you. I—I don't understand you. When I was dressing for dinner——"

"You thought you did? I'm so glad you thought of me, when you were dressing for dinner; I've a sort of feeling that it's not your practice to think of me when you're dressing for dinner."

"I don't imagine my affection makes any great difference in your life," he interrupted stiffly.

"Dear Eric, let me laugh at you sometimes! It's good for you and it's ever so good for me. It isn't as if I'd laughed so very much lately. . . . I *will* come home and I'll go *straight* to bed. But—don't be too hard on me, Eric."

Her voice was trembling, and her eyes had again filled with tears.

"May I say that I'm 'not in' the habit' of being hard on people? But—I don't understand you."

"Ah, now you're repeating yourself," she threw back flippantly over her shoulder, as she went to bid Mrs. Shelley good-night. "I'm telling Marion I've got a headache."

Eric felt that he was slipping into the practice of letting people make a fool of him. . . .

4

Though it was a fine night, they sought in vain for a taxi and had to walk the whole way from Chelsea to Berkeley Square, Barbara with her arm through Eric's and her hand in his, leaning against him.

"I'm going away on Saturday," she reminded him, as they entered Eaton Square.

"High time, too," he answered.

"Do you want to get rid of me as much as all that?" she asked in gentle reproach.

"Well, you'll automatically stop compromising yourself with me. But even that doesn't matter so much as your health, which you're quite deliberately ruining."

She stopped and put her hands on his shoulders, drawing his head to her until she could kiss him. Still capable of being surprised, he thanked Heaven—after a quick survey—that they had Eaton Square to themselves.

"Dear Eric, are you very delicate?" she asked. "It's only when health is mentioned that you become human. Last night, at the very beginning of dinner. . . . And again this evening. If—if I gave in and had a week in bed, I could twist you round my finger. Now, don't pull yourself away and look dignified! Don't you see that I'm

paying you a wonderful compliment? You're like a woman—not that that's a compliment. . . .”

She slipped her arm through his again, and they walked on past St. Peter's. Barbara was tired enough by now to be dragging on his arm, and he felt a sudden responsibility for her—as he had felt the night before when she had implicitly entrusted herself to him. He glanced down and found her walking with eyes closed and a faint smile on a very white face. The wind was blowing her hair into disorder, and he bent forward to draw her cloak more warmly over her chest.

She looked up with her eyes dark and sleep-laden.

“Am I coming undressed? Eric, you're very good to me! I shall miss you. Perhaps you'll write to me, perhaps I shall be coming up to London for just one night in about a week's time; we might dine together. Are you coming to lunch on Saturday?”

“I'll give the matter my best consideration. Go to sleep again, child.”

“Dear Eric!”

She roused again as they crossed Piccadilly; and at the end of Berkeley Street she again cautiously bade him good-night.

“And about Saturday?”

Until that moment he had decided to be immovable about the Saturday invitation. He did not want to go, he wanted still less to make her think that he was going to please her. But, when she stopped him before walking on alone to her house, he felt that their position must be regularized. He had a certain status of his own—and some little pride.

“Yes, I'll come. Delighted,” he said with sudden determination.

“Good-night, dear.”

“Good-night, Lady Barbara.”

There was time for an unexpected hour's work; but his

broken night and jarring day had exhausted him, and he was glad to hurry through his letters and get into bed. Once there he found himself too tired even for the routine of reading the evening paper; and, while he tried to make up his mind to stretch up a hand to the switch, he dropped asleep, clutching the *Westminster Gazette* and with the light blazing on to his face.

So he found himself five minutes later when the telephone-bell rang. The voice of a child, eager for praise, said:

"I'm in bed, Eric. And the light's out. And I'm going to sleep in one moment."

"I was actually asleep," he answered.

"My *dear!* And I woke you up? I *am* sorry. Go to sleep again at *once!* Good-night!"

But the sudden shock of the bell had made his nerves restless. He had, after all, to read the evening paper and two chapters of a novel before he felt sleepy enough to turn out the light and compose himself.

Contrition, whim or pressure of other business kept Barbara out of his life the next morning. He read his letters unmolested, dictated to his secretary undisturbed and worked until mid-day uninterrupted. Then, as it was his practice to walk for half-an-hour before luncheon, he abandoned his own pretence that he was away from London and strolled along Piccadilly into the Green Park before making for the Thespian Club in Grosvenor Place. At Devonshire House he caught himself pausing to glance down Berkeley Street. . . .

At the club, Manders was lunching with a square-faced law lord and a doctor with humorous, shrewd eyes, who called upon Eric to join them.

"We never see anything of you nowadays," complained Dr. Gaisford.

"I don't have time to get as far away as this for lunch

every day," Eric answered, as he pulled a chair in to the table. "You're cutting your vacation short, aren't you, Lord Ettrick?"

"Oh, I had three weeks' fishing in Scotland," the law lord answered. "Ever since I came back, I've been thinking that, if I had my life over again and could choose my own career, on my soul! I'd be a gillie. They're a great breed, and it's a great life."

Manders looked reflectively at the powerful, lined face, tanned yellow over a normally unwholesome white.

"I'd 'a gone into the Navy," he said. "My idea of a holiday is to get into old clothes and moon about the Docks or Portsmouth—anywhere with salt and tar about, you know."

"And what would our young friend do?" asked Dr. Gaisford.

Eric blushed to find three pairs of eyes on him. He thought resentfully over his ten years of journalism; then, with a warm rush of satisfaction, he saw the elaborate little flat in Ryder Street, the bathroom poster of "A Divorce Has Been Arranged," the envelopes from his agent Grier-son, containing cheques for—what *would* they be for?—the invitations, the pleasant hum of work and stir of interest as shewn in letters from country clergymen who objected to his use of the word "God" in a comedy of manners, the deference paid him when he was invited out to be spoiled and petted, the easy triumphs. . . .

"If I had my life over again," he answered slowly, "I should alter—nothing."

Lord Ettrick looked at him with raised eyebrows, chewing his under-lip reflectively.

"I wonder how long you'll say that," he murmured.

A page-boy threaded his way to the table and stood bashfully at a distance with a tarnished salver pressed against his buttons.

"Wanted on the 'phone, sir," he whispered.

Eric rose resignedly and followed the page to a dark, ill-ventilated box behind the porters' desk in the hall.

"Hullo!"

"Is that Eric? Say what you like, my staff-work's extraordinarily efficient!" Barbara's voice rippled into laughter. "You weren't at your flat, I just *divined* that you'd be lunching at your club. I looked in *Who's Who* to see which it was. . . . How are you, Eric, dear? I haven't seen or heard of you since last night."

Eric's utterance hardened and became precise.

"I was asleep then; and I'm at lunch now."

"Who are you lunching with?" she enquired with unabashed interest.

"Oh, nobody that matters! What is it, Lady Barbara? What do you want, I mean?"

"I want to talk to you. Don't you *like* talking to me?"

"At the proper time and in the proper place. I say, you know, this is becoming a little bit tiresome."

There was a short pause; then a crestfallen voice murmured:

"I'm sorry, Eric. I'm truly sorry. I apologize."

"Lady Barbara!" he cried.

There was only a dull click, a silence and then a brisk nasal voice saying, "Number, please?"

Eric strode wrathfully back to the coffee-room.

"You can't do right with that damned girl," he muttered.

His companions were already paying their bills, so he abandoned his cheese and walked upstairs with them to the bright biscuit-coloured card-room overlooking the gardens of Buckingham Palace. While the others drank their coffee, he tried to write a very short, very simple note which somehow rejected his best efforts of phrasing. He had torn up four unsatisfactory drafts when Lord Ettrick threw

away his cigar and asked whether any one was walking towards the Privy Council.

"I'm only scribbling one note," Erie answered.

What he was always in danger of forgetting was that Barbara was really only a child; she had begun to speak with a delightful ripple of laughter, and he had driven it from her voice. When she apologized, there was something hurt, something very much surprised—as though he had seen her smiling and slapped the smile away.

"Please forgive me," he wrote. "*I didn't mean to be rude.*"

5

Before deciding whether to send his letter by hand, Eric ascertained that, by posting it, he could be sure of its reaching its destination by the last delivery. Then he walked through the Park with Lord Ettrick, left him at the door of the Privy Council Office and returned home for an hour's work before rehearsal. On leaving the Regency, he came back to Ryder Street and dressed for dinner. His own letters clattered into their wire cage at a quarter past eight, and, before sitting down to dinner, he transferred the telephone to his dining-room. The child was unlikely to refuse so open an invitation to ring up and say that all was well. . . .

There was no call during dinner, no call as he worked in the smoking-room with the telephone and lamp on a table at his elbow, no call when he went to bed, though he lay reading for half-an-hour after his usual time, to be ready for her. The morning brought a pencilled note ("Surprisingly tidy hand," Eric commented, "seeing what she's like"), instinct with a new aloofness and restraint. "*After your refreshingly plain hint that I was a nuisance to you, I determined that you should not have occasion to suffer from my importunity. You may lunch with us on Satur-*

day, if you like. And I shall be very glad indeed to see you, but you must not feel that you are doing this to please me. I SAY as you THINK: that I have no claim on you. Barbara."

Eric smiled indulgently and tossed the note into a despatch-box before ringing for his secretary. He must be more careful in future. . . .

When he looked at his engagement-book on Saturday morning, he found that Barbara had named no hour; which was characteristic of her. When he telephoned to the house, there was no answer; which—by no great stretch of calumny—was characteristic of the house in which she lived. Ninety per cent. of the people that he knew lunched at half-past one, excluding a Cabinet Minister, who lunched punctually at a quarter past two, and three Treasury clerks and one novelist who lunched at one; accordingly, at half-past one, he presented himself in Berkeley Square, to be informed by a sedately combative butler that luncheon was at two o'clock but that Barbara was believed to be in her room.

Eric followed his guide up four short flights of marble stairs and was shewn into the untidiest room that he had ever seen, filled in equal measure with the priceless and the worthless. The bindings of Riviere rubbed shoulders with tattered paper-backs; a cabinet of Japanese porcelain was outraged by foolish, intrusive china cats; there was a shelf of Waterford glass with a dynasty of blown-glass pigs, descending from the ten-inch-high parent to the thumb-nail baby of the litter—gravely and ridiculously arranged in a serpentine procession. Fifty kinds of trophy adorned the mantel-piece, ranging from a West African idol at one end to a pathetic, brown-eyed Teddy Bear at the other, with stiff, conventional photographs and occasional miniatures for punctuation. He recognized his own silver flask—and passed on, with a smile. Three small tables were almost

buried beneath their load of pink carnations; a box of cigarettes, half-open and half-empty, lay tucked between the cushions in each of three arm-chairs, and the white bear-skin rug was littered with *The Times*, a round milliner's box, two cheque-books and a volume of Ronsard.

The butler looked dispassionately at the confusion and withdrew, giving it up as a hopeless task. A moment later he returned to inform Eric that her ladyship would be with him immediately. Ten minutes later Barbara came in by another door to find him cautiously picking his way through the disorder and examining her books and pictures.

"I didn't expect you so early," she began. "Will you give me a little kiss, or am I still a nuisance?"

"You didn't say any time, so I chanced half-past one," Eric answered. "If you'd told me to come at two, you'd still have been ten minutes late, wouldn't you?" he added with a laugh. "Lady Barbara, your conception of tidiness——"

She opened her eyes wide at him in unfeigned surprise.

"My dear, but you should see my bedroom!" she suggested.

"The purple bedroom?"

"Did you remember that? I believe you're beginning to like me, Eric. Come and sit down instead of fidgeting."

He paused to finish his inspection, ending up with the nursery toy-cupboard on the mantel-piece.

"Hullo! I don't know this one of Jack Waring," he exclaimed on reaching a cabinet photograph in a silver frame.

Barbara lighted a cigarette and came beside him, resting her hand on one shoulder and looking over the other at the photograph, her hair brushing against his cheek.

"He—— Give me another match, Eric; this is burning all down one side—— It's good, don't you think?"

"The best I've ever seen of him, poor chap. I must get his sister to give me one."

"And don't forget that you're going to find out whether they've had any news of him, will you? Johnny Carstairs asked the Foreign Office to make enquiries through Copenhagen and Madrid, but he hasn't been able to find out anything."

"I should be afraid there's nothing to find out," Eric murmured. "He's been missing for weeks."

"But if he's been wounded or lost his identification disc—a hundred things. And it takes months to get news sometimes. D'you like my pig family, Eric?"

"Not among Waterford glass," he answered. "Except as part of the general setting for you."

She replaced the photograph, laughing, and took his arm, leading him round the room and giving him the history of her trophies, until a footman knocked and announced that luncheon was on the table.

Eric spent the next five minutes being pushed round a large library, which seemed to contain twice as many voices as people, and introduced to a second person before he had fixed the identity of the first. Lady Crawleigh was timorous and subdued, with an air of having been all her life interrupted in the middle of her sentences and with a compensating pair of flashing pigeon's eyes which seemed to miss nothing.

"I'm so glad Babs gave us the opportunity of meeting you," she said to Eric. "I enjoyed your play so much. Your first, wasn't it? It must be a glorious sensation to make such a success at the outset."

("She takes in a thousand times more than she ever gives out," Eric said to himself; then he found himself being spun through the rest of the family. "Wonder what she does with it?")

Lord Crawleigh interrupted an indignant, staccato con-

versation with Lady Maitland, who was holding her own with emphatic shakes of a massive head, to touch fingertips and introduce him to his sister—the whole done cholerically and with the air of transacting a great deal of tiresome business in a short time.

("Bullies the life out of every one, I've always heard," was Eric's private comment, as he was introduced to a pair of tow-haired young officers with limp hands; "except the girl. And she bullies him.")

"I knew you by sight at Oxford," said Lord Neave, withdrawing his limp hand jerkily, as though he feared that it would be stolen. "You were at Trinity, weren't you? You, er, know my brother Charles—Mr. Lane."

Eric grasped a second limp hand, received a quick, business-like nod from John Gaymer and found himself confronted by the Duchess of Ross.

"No one will introduce us!" she cried shrilly with a vermillion pout. "I've *so* much wanted to meet you, Mr. Lane. You *wouldn't* dine when I asked you! Won't *some one* introduce us *properly*!"

The babble of high-toned voices, the quick patter of speech, the sense of hurry, the hyperbolical intimacy and enthusiasm were bewildering to a man who was naturally shy and at that moment mentally tired. Eric commended his soul to his humour and circumambulated the room, two steps at a time, until a sudden lessening of noise and tension told him that luncheon had dawned upon Lady Crawleigh as a thing to be not only discussed but eaten.

"We've heard so *much* about you from Babs," she said, struggling to finish one of her interrupted sentences. "So good of you to bring her home the other night."

Eric poised himself on mental tip-toes, wondering, in general, how far Barbara made her family a party to her life and, in particular, to which night Lady Crawleigh was alluding.

"Really——," he began.

"She gets these turns," Lady Crawleigh pursued. "I blame myself entirely; I allowed her to stay on working at the hospital when she simply wasn't fit for it. Now *she* has to pay for *my* weakness."

Eric looked from one to the other.

"I should prescribe three months in the country; bed at ten—and make her stay there for twelve hours."

"I should be out of my mind in a week," Barbara protested.

There was a pause, and Lady Crawleigh, with a rueful shrug, turned away to speak to Gaymer.

"I *like* the way you order me *into* bed and *out* of bed!" Barbara whispered. "If you cared what happened to me, it would be one thing, but, when I'm becoming a bit of a nuisance, you know. . . ."

Eric looked round cautiously and lowered his voice.

"Lady Barbara," he began.

"You persist in that?"

"Babs, then——"

"Yes, but you're receiving a favour, not conferring it."

He drew a deep breath.

"You are the most exasperating——"

"Dear Eric! I can't help teasing you! Are you the clever only child? Well, you ought to be. . . . I don't believe any one's ever teased you before. You mustn't *be* exasperated by me!"

Her laughter was irresistible, and Eric joined in it.

"Lady Barbara—I'm sorry—Babs, this is serious. You say you'd be out of your mind in a week, if you adopted my prescription. Let me tell you this; if you go on as you're doing now, you *will* go out of your mind——"

"I shouldn't bother you, if I were in an asylum."

Eric stiffened and turned his attention to the food before him.

"You're not an *easy* person to talk to——," he began.

"Oh, you dear child!" said Barbara, with a gurgle of laughter. "*Two* minutes ago it was, 'Ahaw, Lady Crawleigh, I should prescribe . . .' And *one* minute ago you became earnest and loving and grand-paternal, with your fond advice! . Eric, I love you when you're like that! Now don't be self-conscious! 'Your ideahs of tidiness, aw, Lady Barbarah . . .' Whatever people may say, I believe you're intelligent. In time you'll understand." Her eyes softened and ceased to laugh at him. "Less than half a week! In time you'll know what you've done for me, what I very humbly hope and pray you're going to go on doing for me. . . . You'll know why I trust you and love you more than I've ever loved any one in my life before. There! Is that plain enough? I don't say it excuses my being 'tiresome,' but it may explain it. . . . Now don't say, 'Lady Barbarah, I—er—I don't—aw—understand you!'" Her fingers twined their way confidingly between his. "Why bother? Why not go on being just what you are?" she whispered. "Something that's made me think life's still worth living. I don't *claim* it," she added with a change of tone. "I ask it."

"And will you do something for me in return?" Eric asked. "Will you take six months' complete rest in the country, drop smoking——?"

"But I told you I should go out of my mind in a week!"

"Will you go for six weeks, six *days*?"

"You want to get rid of me?"

Eric felt his patience ebbing.

"I want to see you looking less of a haggard little wreck than you do now," he exclaimed.

"Then I'll go. Thank you, Eric."

From the end of the table Lord Crawleigh's voice penetrated authoritatively.

"Barbara! . . . Barbara! Are you coming with us by the 4.10?"

She pressed Eric's hand before turning her head.

"I can't come till the 5.40," she said.

"But, my dear Barbara——"

"I—*can't*, father."

("Bullies the life out of every one, I've always heard," Eric repeated to himself, as Lord Crawleigh subsided into inarticulate blustering. "Except the girl. And she bullies him.")

"I did wonderful staff-work with Waterloo this morning," Barbara confided. "The 5.40 stops at Winchester *and* Crawleigh."

"I could have told you that," said Eric. "So could Bradshaw, deceased."

"But fancy looking at Bradshaw, when you can persuade some one to look at it for you! . . . And you can't get *anywhere* in Bradshaw without going through the Severn Tunnel and waiting two hours at Bletchley. Besides, Waterloo rather loved me. Just my voice, you know. . . . We'll go down together. You can wire to your people."

"I told them I'd come by the 5.40."

"But how lucky!"

"How—understanding," he amended.

"If you can be sure of your opponent, you may win by throwing down your weapon. It is the victory of the weak over the strong, the 'tyranny of tears.' Or perhaps it is the victory of the weak over the weaker. But you must be sure of your opponent."—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER THREE

LASHMAR MILL-HOUSE

"I've come back . . . and I was the King of Kafirstani . . . and you've been setting here ever since—O Lord!"

RUDYARD KIPLING: "THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING."

I

As the crow flies, Lashmar Mill-House is but five miles from Winchester. By road, however, there are six miles of tolerable grey flint and rusty gravel on the Winchester and Melton turnpike, followed by three Irish miles of unaided forest track. Half of it lies under water for six months of the year; but in the summer a rutted ride projects from stony sand-pockets framed in velvet moss, with tidal-waves of bracken surging up from the dells at the road-side and low branches meeting to net the sun-shine.

At the end of the three miles Swanley Forest seems to have paused for breath. There is a natural clearing a mile long and three quarters of a mile broad—cherished common-land, where the Lashmar villagers walk many assertive miles of a Sunday to preserve their rights of way; where, too, tethered goats and errant geese make good their eleventh-century claim to free pasturage. At one end of the down-soft clearing, a Methodist chapel, two shops and five cottages constitute the village of Lashmar; at the other lies Lashmar Mill-House, slumbering half-hidden by beech trees to the unchanging murmur of the Bort. The relevant deeds and charters prove beyond a doubt that the lord of Lashmar Mill-House has the right to make Lashmar village

grind its corn in his mill, paying him in kind and yielding three days' labour a year to grind his. The ambitions of Sir Francis Lane and of his eldest son, however, were not feudal.

The autumn floods were lapping the road-side as Eric and his sister left the twinkling lights behind and turned, after a crackling six miles of metalled high-way, on to the primæval ride that bored faint-heartedly through the forest. He was tired and uncommunicative, though his journey from Waterloo had been uneventful; once inside the carriage and tucked warmly into a corner, Barbara had closed her eyes, sighed and dropped asleep. Not until he stirred himself to collect his hat and coat did she open her eyes and look round with a tired smile; as the train steamed out of Winchester, an ungloved hand fluttered into sight for a moment.

It was Eric's first visit to Lashmar since the production of the "Divorce" had made his name known throughout England; and he could not conceal from himself that he was trying to render his return agreeably dramatic. Lady Lane assisted the conspiracy by inviting their few neighbours to meet him; Sybil was awaiting him on the platform with ill-suppressed excitement; and it was entirely appropriate that Agnes Waring should dine at the Mill-House on his first night at home.

"Geoff came home on leave yesterday," said Sybil.

"From Scapa? Oh, good! I haven't seen him for a long time," said Eric.

But for Basil, who was in Salonica, the party would be complete; and Eric felt a moment's compunction at having allowed himself to be so much caught up by the work and distractions of London. When the car stopped at the door of the Mill-House, he looked with affection at its squat, sleepy extent, punctuated with lifeless, dark windows and wrapped in age-long slumber; as the door opened, he saw

his mother silhouetted against the golden light of the hall.

"At last, Eric!" she cried.

"It's good to be home again, mother," he answered, jumping out of the car and embracing her.

While his sister drove round to the stables, Eric walked arm-in-arm with his mother into the low, warm hall. For more than thirty years Lady Lane had guarded, counselled and provided for an eccentric husband and a turbulent family, shouldering the cares of all, budgeting, nursing and educating on an income which slipped unrewardingly away until she assumed control. She had learned Greek and Latin to help the boys with their home-work and had trained their characters in an austere school of aggressive puritanism. If she were a little intolerant, at least she reared her children to a lofty sense of honour, a cold chastity of life and speech and a fierce refusal to compromise where truth or personal reputation was concerned. Thanks to her, three boys and one girl were now able to fend for themselves; Sybil, factotum and amanuensis to her father ever since she had learned to read, could support herself anywhere; Geoff was firmly on his feet in the Navy, Basil had passed into the Civil Service a few weeks before the outbreak of war. Lady Lane was justly content with her children; of Eric, whom she had kept alive when the doctors despaired of him, she was justly proud.

"Come into the drawing-room," she said, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "I've got a fire there."

"Nothing's changed," said Eric wonderingly.

Lashmar Mill-House, for all its size, contained hardly more than two rooms on the ground-floor; a vast, book-lined study for Sir Francis, an equally vast living-room for the rest of the family and, between them, a furtive, dark rectangle where they hurried through their meals. Eric had begged for years to have the back wall removed from the hall to make an adequate dining-room, but his mother had

grown middle-aged in a familiar compass and did not care to be told by him too explicitly how the house should be run and improved. In the moment of arrival Eric was too much pleased with his welcome to be critical.

"You look tired," she said, holding his face to the light. "Tell me what you've been doing all this while. You've become a great celebrity, Eric."

"There's nothing much to tell. I've been doing a lot of work, meeting a lot of people. . . . It's been rather fun. . . ."

As soon as she had put away the car, Sybil joined them and stood with her back to the fire and her hands in the pockets of a short tweed skirt, staring idly at her own small feet in their brown stockings and thick brogues and rousing herself with an abrupt jerk of the head when she wanted to intervene with a question.

"You were *barely* civil, when I rang you up the other night," she interjected, in a pause, with the disconcerting directness of nineteen.

"I was late already, and you were making me later," Eric answered patiently. "That night——? Oh, yes."

He detailed Lady Poynter's dinner to his mother and observed an expression of mixed curiosity and disapproval settling upon his sister's face.

"Mrs. O'Rane? Sonia Dainton that was? H'm," said Sybil. "And Lady Barbara Neave. Are you being taken up by *that* set now, Ricky?"

"I don't quite know what you mean by 'being taken up.' I met them at dinner. . . . And I lunched with the Crawleighs to-day," he added without filling in the intervening encounters. "Lady Crawleigh wants me to go down there next week-end, but I'm too busy; and week-ends simply wear me out."

"You *have* made yourself popular with them all at once!" Sybil commented. "What's Lady Barbara like?"

"Interesting girl," Eric answered casually.

"Is she anything like what people make her out to be?"

Eric smiled tolerantly.

"I don't know enough of what people make her out to be," he replied. Sybil was smiling mysteriously and exasperatingly to herself. . . . "Is the gov'nor working?" he asked his mother.

Eric prowled through the hall to his father's big work-room. Sir Francis was sitting bent over a litter of papers, with a green eye-shade clamped to his lined forehead and an ill-smelling corn-cob drooping from beneath his unassertive grey moustache. In an arm-chair before the fire Geoff was contentedly dozing with the bog-mud steaming from his boots and a half-cleaned gun across his knees. By his side an elderly retriever peered reflectively into the flames and from time to time yawned silently.

"'Evening, everybody," said Eric. "I've been sent to hunt you off to dress, father. You asleep, Geoff? If not, how are you?"

Sir Francis pulled off the eye-shade and held out his hand with a wintry smile. The boy in the arm-chair turned on to his other side and dropped asleep again with a disgusted grunt.

"He's got about a year to make up," explained Sir Francis. "The Grand Fleet doesn't do much sleeping. Well, Eric, what news?"

"Everything very much as usual," was the answer.

"Everything's always very much as usual here," said his father, as he turned out the reading-lamp.

He sighed as he said it, and Eric tried to calculate the number of years in which he had come down like this for the week-end—to be met, before the era of motor-cars, by a fat pony and a governess cart, to be greeted by his mother with affection which he never seemed able to repay, to drift into the library and detach his lank, unaging father from

his studies. Sir Francis had accepted marriage and the presence of a wife as he would have accepted a new house and strange house-keeper; children had been born; after the publication of his *Smaller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* the friend of a friend had recommended him, through a friend's friend, for a knighthood, and he had bestirred himself with wide-eyed, childish surprise for the investiture and a congratulatory dinner at the Athenæum, returning to Lashmar Mill-House grievously unsettled and discontented for as much as a week. He had talked of running up to London occasionally, of having these fellows down for the week-end; he had complained that he was growing rusty and losing touch with the world. Then the murmur of the mill-stream had drugged his senses, and he had settled to the *Century Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*, Volume VII E-G.

After the restlessness of London, Eric could not at once accommodate himself to the leisurely contentment and placidity of Lashmar.

"Wake up, Geoff!" he cried.

The boy yawned and stretched himself like a cat, then became suddenly active and projected himself across the room, turning in the door-way to shout: "Bags I first bath, Ricky!"

"Well, don't take all the hot water," Eric begged. After the ingenious comfort of his flat in Ryder Street, he could not at once accommodate himself to the simplicity of the Mill-House. "Pity you never turned the east room into a bathroom," he said to his father. "You talked about it for years. We *need* another one."

It was an old controversy and part of Eric's persistent but fruitless campaign against the studiedly Spartan attitude of Lashmar Mill-House.

"It's rather an unnecessary expense. And we seem to struggle on without it," said Sir Francis.

"I avoid unnecessary struggles as much as possible," Eric answered shortly.

"You couldn't get the work done while the war's on," Sir Francis pointed out, rooting himself firmly in the particular.

Eric walked upstairs, reflecting in moody dissatisfaction on unnecessary struggles. No one ever laid out his dress clothes for him at Lashmar. It never *had* been done when he was a school-boy, carefully protected from pampering. Sporadic attempts were made, whenever he launched an offensive against the domestic economy of the house; but the maids were always changing, Lady Lane believed that all men-servants drank or stole the cigars. . . . In the last resort, these country-bred girls were so difficult to teach. . . .

Down the passage came the sound of emptying taps and a voice singing cheerfully in the bath.

"Don't stay there all night, Geoff!" Eric cried, banging on the door. "It's a quarter to eight now."

It was five minutes to eight before the bathroom, sloppy and filled with steam, was surrendered to him. No man could have a hot bath and dress in five minutes; he was particularly anxious to appear at his best for the meeting with Agnes. . . .

And the water was tepid. . . .

2

"I have been apologizing for you," said Lady Lane pointedly, as Eric hurried late and ill-humoured into the drawing-room.

He had ready at hand a caustic little speech about inadequate hot-water supply and insufficient bathrooms, but it was intended for domestic consumption and, after one scowl at Geoff, he laid it aside. Family altercations, like family jokes, should be reserved for the family, though no

one else emulated his moderation. He wondered whether the servants grew as weary as he did of the story about the cross-country journey from Oxford to Winchester; it was dragged up at his expense whenever any one missed a train—and trains were missed weekly. Servants, of course, could always leave; they always did. Perhaps they made bets which would hear the Oxford-to-Winchester story most often in three months; perhaps they met in sullen conspiracy and pledged themselves to decamp in a body the next time any one heard it. . . .

That tepid bath had chilled his enjoyment of everything. . . .

"I'm sorry to be late," he murmured, stiffly impenitent.

Agnes Waring was in the foreground, talking to his father; he shook hands shyly and squeezed past her to Nares, the apologetic, ineffectual vicar, and from Nares to Mrs. Waring, who was talking to a young officer whom she had brought over with her party. Colonel Waring stood by the fire, retailing safe newspaper opinions on the war and representing to Eric's theatre-trained eyes, with their passion for "types," almost too perfect a picture of the younger brother who had passed from twenty years in a cavalry regiment to half-pay retirement and a certain military pretentiousness of daily life. There was no one else. Had their lives depended on it, Lashmar could not yield another man or woman.

"Entertaining here always reminds me of a musical comedy," Eric murmured to Sybil. "Where one goes, all go:

*"Oh, we're all of us a-going back to Lon-don,
Over ocean; that's the notion . . .*

"Song and dance. Curtain. Who's the fellow in uniform?"

"Mr. Benyon. A friend of the Warings," Sybil an-

swered. "You're not going to be patronizing, *are* you?"

Eric pulled up and banished the ill-humour induced generally by the sleepiness of the country and, in particular, by that tepid bath-water. He had looked forward to the week-end, he proposed to enjoy himself; there was no need even to ask where he had been placed at dinner. Sybil, at nineteen, worshipped every word and movement in Agnes Waring at twenty-eight—her way of laughing and speaking, her phraseology, her mental outlook; every opinion was introduced with the words, "Agnes says——" Two years before, when the infatuation was in its perfervid youth, Sybil had made up her mind that her brother was to marry Agnes; the determination was still so strong that she was uneasy at the presence of young Benyon.

Eric had no strong view either way; Agnes was fair, slight and small-featured with observant grey eyes and a good deal of detached humour. Since the incubation of his first unsuccessful play, he had argued out every character and situation with her; when feminine psychology was in dispute, her ruling was accepted without cavil. More than once, as they splashed conversationally through the Lashmar woods, he had felt that she gave even a self-sufficient bachelor something that he lacked and would always lack; and, whenever the ubiquitous, dry celibacy of the Thespian smoking-room oppressed him, his thoughts drifted to Agnes Waring and a doll's house somewhere on the Eaton estate, with one table, two chairs and an avalanche of green silk cushions in the drawing-room. . . . He was not in love with her; but, when Sybil telephoned to find whether he was coming to the country for the week-end, he had resolved to retouch his conception of Agnes. For the first time in his life he could not only afford to marry; he could regard marriage from the standpoint of an eligible bachelor. If he was not in love with Agnes, he was in love with love. . . .

Distant voices wakened him from his reverie, and he found the long, low white-and-gold drawing-room buzzing with congratulations. Benyon had been to the "Divorce" three nights before; old Nares rubbed his hands, coughed and described a proud moment, a *very* proud moment, when he had been taken behind at the Lyceum and presented to Sir Henry Irving. There followed an ingenuous account of his make-up. . . . Eric smiled elastically, stroking his chin and letting his gaze wander round the white panelled walls, the gilt sofa and chairs and the gold and white overmantel—the coming of Dionysus to Europe in a chariot drawn by lions. He realized for the first time how much he hated overmantels.

Sybil was now talking to Agnes, but she withdrew discreetly at his approach and gave him an opportunity, as they went in to dinner, for a question about Jack.

"We've heard nothing since the August report that he was missing," said Agnes. "I'm keeping my mind a blank. I couldn't build all sorts of wonderful hopes on his being a prisoner and then, perhaps, have to go through the whole thing again. . . . Mother's quite certain, of course; but then mothers are like that, bless them. . . . I'll let you know, if we hear any news, Eric."

"Thanks very much. By the way, can you spare me one of the van Laun photographs of him?"

Agnes thought for a moment and then wrinkled her forehead.

"He was never taken by van Laun."

"But I've seen one."

"Where?"

"He gave one to Lady Barbara Neave."

Her forehead wrinkled in deeper lines of perplexity.

"I didn't know he even knew her. . . . He never mentioned her name; I suppose he thought I should disapprove."

Eric was tempted to coax an opinion of Barbara; but they had known each other for less than a week, and, if he went round collecting the judgements of all who had ever heard of her, no one would believe that a serene, professional spirit of enquiry prompted his curiosity. While native caution kept him hesitating, the opportunity slipped away; Agnes surrendered to the boisterous advances of Geoff, and he turned to find Mrs. Nares tentatively conversational on his left.

For a quarter of an hour Eric listened with one ear to the parish history of Lashmar. Unknown names married and begot families; unknown names sickened and died or were unexpectedly revived when the copiously described symptoms had rendered recovery an affront to the imagination; a few unknown names joined the army; one man was a prisoner, another wounded; and two more lastingly discredited Lashmar by saying that, when the army wanted them, the army could come and take them. Eric was informed that he would hardly know the dear old village now; he felt that he could support the privation with fortitude and hoped its annals might be closed with that felicitous generalization, but Mrs. Nares had recollected her husband's gallant attempt to be accepted as a chaplain and the Bishop's gracefully worded inability to spare him, with a postscript in his own writing to commend such spirit in a man of sixty-two and to hold him up as an example to his juniors.

Eric made mental notes of Mrs. Nares and memorized some of her more engaging mannerisms. If he could work her up, he could find room for her; but he must also find some one to play her with a breathless, unpunctuated patter; Kitty Walters seemed to have gone to America for good, but Dorothy Martlet could take the part. . . . The whole dinner, the atmosphere of the place were a satire

on life in a remote country-house. He wondered what the party at Crawleigh Abbey was like. . . .

An unforeseen question rebuked his inattention. Eric disposed of it skilfully; but the thread of thought was snapped, and he looked round the table to see what had been happening since his reverie began. Agnes had been set at liberty by Geoff and was watching Eric as he watched the others. Their eyes met, and both smiled.

"Conscription between your father and Benyon over Sybil's body," he murmured, disentangling the conversations. "Needlework Guild between the gov'nor and Mrs. Nares. Poor old gov'nor. . . . V. A. D. training between mother and the vicar. '*Naval Occasions*' between your mother and Geoff. D'you ever feel you'd like to stir all this up with a pole, Agnes? We're too far from the coast for an air-raid. . . . And, if you had one, no one would ever talk about anything else for the rest of his life; it would be like the Famine in Ireland or the Wesley descent on Cornwall." A maid, squeezing through the inadequate fairway behind the chairs, bumped Eric's back and made him spill his wine. "This place gets on my nerves!" he added irritably.

Out of the corner of her eye Agnes looked at his mobile, discontented face and crumbled her bread in silence for a moment.

"Don't give up coming here altogether," she pleaded.

Eric sipped his wine thoughtfully and avoided her eyes. Here was an opportunity, had he cared to take it, for opening up a greater intimacy with Agnes; but his mind was unconcentrated and he did not know what he wanted.

"I suppose I shall come down from time to time," he answered vaguely.

"I've been so looking forward to hearing about all you've been doing. We don't make much history in Lashmar."

It was common ground between them that the Warings

lacked money for her to live as independently as all Warings felt that every Waring had a right to live. Each generation of younger brothers had been confined within an ever-narrowing circle; and, but for the war, Jack would now be patiently going the North Eastern Circuit, the first Waring to apply his mind to law; but for Jack and the money spent on him at Oxford, Agnes would have gone to Newnham and prepared a career for herself.

"You're too good for this place, you're wasted," Eric broke out after a moment's silent brooding.

"There's not much choice, is there?"

Eric brooded again.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"Happier than you are, I think," she answered with a smile.

"Why on earth d'you say that?" he asked in surprise.

"You just seem changed to-night," Agnes replied. "Have you been working too hard?"

Over his port—which would not stand comparison with any from the artful little cellar in Ryder Street—Eric tried to settle in his mind how much she had seen and how much she had imagined. There was assuredly this much change in him, that to-night Agnes was not even waking him to dispassionate interest; he had no attention to spare her. And yet it was not that Barbara had captured his mind; she was nothing but an elf of mischief, dancing in the sunshine backwards and forwards across his path, pelting him with flowers, vanishing and reappearing. Restlessness or discontent must have peeped from behind the suave mask. He had meant to be more friendly, far more friendly; they had not met for nine months;—and both were disappointed.

In the drawing-room Agnes kept her chair a few inches behind the circle of the others, watching, listening and reflecting. Eric seemed to think that he was still at one of the tiresome long parties where he was expected to glitter

and to be shewn off; he had talked very well at times, but he felt that he had been making voluble conversation in a nervous dread of silence between them. His new life was rather turning him into a public entertainer; he was enigmatic and unapproachable.

3

As Eric, with caution born of experience, lit one of his own cigars and made room for Geoff at his side, an idea came to him so seductive, so simple and so compelling that he wondered why he had never thought of it before. When Geoff asked: "Are you down here for long, or are you going back on Monday?" Eric answered with unsought inspiration:

"I shall go back on Sunday night."

It had never occurred to him before that, by this facile course, he could avoid an early and cold drive into Winchester, a crowded train, a free fight for the last copy of *The Times*, a late arrival at the department where he composed propaganda for neutral consumption. And he had never felt so urgent a need to escape from the Mill-House.

"I haven't seen your jolly old play yet," said Geoff. "I suppose I can count on you for a box? If you'll give us dinner first, I might collect a few bright lads and give the thing a bit of a fillip. I should think it must be rather a rag, being famous."

"I suppose that depends on your definition of fame—and of a rag," Eric answered.

"Oh, being invited everywhere," said Geoff unhesitatingly. "Having your photograph in all the papers. Girls waiting in a queue for your autograph. A galaxy of beauty prostrating itself at your feet to get an extra line."

"That sounds more like musical comedy," said Eric doubtfully. "I don't fly as high as that."

Geoff was too young to have outgrown the appeal of the stage. He regarded Eric with as much admiration as one brother accords another and with undisguised envy.

"I *did* enjoy your play," said Benyon, moving into a chair by his side. "Agnes came up to dine with me, and I took her. . . ."

Eric bowed without listening to the end of the sentence. He was mildly surprised to find Agnes being discussed by her Christian name and wondered why he had not heard of Benyon before. Perhaps it was her fault that they had established no spiritual contact at dinner; she had conceivably lost interest in him, and he wondered whether he was sufficiently interested to make sure. . . .

"The mater told me you'd another thing on the stocks," Geoff went on.

"It's being produced next month," answered Eric.

He looked impatiently round the cramped dining-room, listening for a moment to an altercation between Waring and Nares on the Dardanelles expedition. It was surely worth while to explore Agnes further and to see what part in her life this young Benyon was playing. . . .

Fortified by the wise decision to return to London earlier than he had first intended, Eric entered the drawing-room full of toleration and good-humour. Bending over Mrs. Nares' sofa, he atoned for his inattention during dinner with thirty seconds' belated sparkle and a simple epigram which he had already tried with effect on Mrs. Shelley. They were joined by Mrs. Waring, and, as he had hardly spoken to her all the evening, he consented to talk about his forthcoming play—which he enjoyed as little as a superstitious mother might enjoy describing her unborn child—until in a subsequent regrouping she confided to Sybil that

she was very much attached to Eric; he was so unspoiled, so charming. . . .

"Aren't you rather proud of him?" she asked.

"Yes. He's very clever and he's had a big success," Sybil conceded critically. "But, if any one says 'Lane,' the whole world thinks of Eric, while father, who's spent his life——"

She was interrupted by Mr. Nares, who stationed himself at her elbow, coughing apologetically until she gave him an opportunity of asking her to sing. As she went to the piano, Eric moved across the room to Agnes' chair and suggested that they should go out on the terrace.

"It's stifling in here," he grumbled; and, after a quick sidelong glance, Agnes followed him.

They strolled through one of the French windows to a long gravel path, which ran flush with the inky, slow-moving mill-stream. Overhead the trees stretched across the narrow ribbon of water, brushing the back of the house and releasing brittle leaves of copper and dull gold to undulate in the breeze before they settled on the surface and swept gently over the creaking wheel. A crescent moon was reflected unwaveringly in the black water, and the autumn breeze blew a scent of decaying, damp vegetation from the dense woods all around them.

"Remember when we used to have races with paper boats, Agnes?" Eric asked suddenly.

She nodded, wondering why he had reminded her.

"What years ago it seems!"

"Only about five. Though we were both old enough to know better."

"It seems longer," said Agnes, looking at him thoughtfully and wondering whether he had only invited her out there as a demonstration against Sybil for disparaging him to her mother.

"I don't *feel* a day older."

"You're changed. We were all of us saying that before

you came into the drawing-room to-night. Your mother's rather worried about you, Eric."

He lighted a cigarette to shew the steadiness of hand and eyes.

"She needn't bother," he answered easily. "I'm carrying a good deal of sail—but I'm better than I've ever been. Agnes, I don't usually talk about what I'm only *thinking* of doing, but with you it's different. . . ."

He slipped her arm through his and walked up and down the gravel path describing his conception of a novel as it had revealed itself to him a week before when he was at an Albert Hall concert. His confidence flattered her into disregarding the egotism which made him remember her only when he wanted to talk about himself; she forgot the sensation that he had outgrown her as much as he had outgrown the paper-boat races on the mill-stream by their side. Once the night wind, blowing on to her unprotected shoulders, sent a shiver through her; but it was Eric who coughed, and she wondered whether he knew why Lady Lane always looked so anxiously at his sunken cheeks and starved body. She wondered, too, whether she would have cared for him so much if he had been robust and tranquil as Geoff.

The music had ended long before he had done talking; tentative cries of "Agnes!" passed unheeded, and she was only recalled to the present by the appearance of Colonel Waring in overcoat and soft hat half-way through the open window.

"Bed-time, Agnes," he called out, sniffing the night air. "If you've been giving that girl of mine a chill, Eric——"

"You're not cold, are you?" Eric asked her.

"Not very," she answered with a tired and rather disappointed smile.

"Oh, but why didn't you tell me?" he protested in a convincing voice of concern, as he led her back into the house

and helped her into her cloak. As a chorus of farewell rose and isolated them, he lowered his voice. "You'll let me know when you have any news of Jack, won't you?"

"If," she answered wistfully.

"You mustn't lose heart. I expect he's all right, and there's been some hitch in getting the news through. He's all right, Agnes."

"I hope so."

She shook hands and walked despondently into the night. Eric seemed to have become artificial in the last few months—just when he might have helped her most. He lengthened his face and lowered his voice sympathetically, but he was growing into a social puppet and losing his individuality. . . . It had not been a very amusing dinner.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" Colonel Waring asked her, as they settled into the car.

"Very much, thanks," she answered quietly. "I'm rather tired, though."

Benyon told her that Eric's new play was to be produced within a month and invited her to come with him. She answered uncertainly and lapsed into silence.

As the car bumped over the springy turf of Lashmar Common, Eric stood gazing at the stars and drinking in the thousand mingled scents and sounds of the night. Somewhere hard by, a bonfire was pungently smouldering; there was a sour smell where a flock of geese had been feeding all day; flaring acridly across was a transitory reek of burnt lubricating oil, and the hint of a cigar so faint that it was gone before he could be sure of it. . . . The lumbering creak of the mill-wheel rose assertively above the drone and splash of the stream; a shiver of rain and a gentle sigh of wind in the top branches of the trees behind him were suddenly swallowed by the hoot of an owl.

Eric started—and wondered why he was standing there in the cold. Then he remembered that he had stayed to

be by himself and to think something out. There was a change somewhere, and he was trying to locate it. He had come to retouch his memory of Agnes, and he had seen her alone and with others; they had talked the conventional jargon of the dinner-table, their fingers had brushed emotion as they discussed her missing brother, and for half an hour they had marched up and down the terrace arm-in-arm, discussing and arguing on an unwritten book, recapturing an old intimacy which he had shared with no one else. In the light of the drawing-room Agnes' grey eyes were black and mysterious; her lips were parted, and her cheeks warmly flushed; he had never seen her look prettier, he had never been more attracted by her.

The change must be in himself; he demanded of her something more volcanic and inspiring than she could give, something to feed his own languid vitality instead of placidly laying him to rest. . . .

Shutting the front door, he went back to the drawing-room, where the family was assembled to compare notes and pool information.

"The vicar's starting a class for making bandages. . . ."

"The Warings haven't heard anything of Jack yet. . . ."

"That Benyon must be one of the Herefordshire lot, I fancy. An old private bank. . . ."

Eric hesitated on the threshold, looking from one to another. Sybil was undisguisedly disappointed; she had so desperately set her heart on his marrying her beloved Agnes, and the night's meeting had brought them no nearer. Lady Lane, still anxious, beckoned him into the room and took his face between her hands, turning it to the light and kissing his eyes again, as on his arrival.

"You look tired, Eric. You'd better go to bed, or you'll never be down to breakfast."

"I wasn't thinking seriously of being down to breakfast in any case," he answered with a yawn.

"Oh, don't be late. It makes so much extra work for the maids, if they have to serve several breakfasts and can't get in to do your room."

He smothered an impatient retort and strolled to a table by the fire where Sybil and her father were sipping long tumblers of hot milk, while Geoff gulped home-made lemonade with avid enjoyment.

"Any whiskey?" he asked, raking the tray with critical eye. He did not greatly want it for himself or at that moment, but every night the same plea had to be preferred, there was the same hesitation and hint of inward struggle, the same unspoken protest, as though the shocked stalwarts of temperance were saying: "You can't want whiskey after claret *and* port." He was being made to drink for conscience sake. And it was intolerable that Waring, Benyon and Nares should have been sent into the night without a stirrup-cup.

"It's in the dining-room," said Sybil, walking reproachfully to the door.

"Here! All right! I'll ring," Eric cried.

"The servants are all in bed," she answered. "Or, if they're not, they ought to be."

He thanked her suitably on her return, but one discordant, trifling incident coalesced with another, the tepid bath with the whiskey demonstration, to give him a sense of angular discomfort. In a few hours he seemed to spend a month's nervous energy in battling for things that were not worth winning. The whole week-end would be a failure. . . .

The milk tumblers were returned to their tray; Sir Francis filled his corn-cob for the last time; Geoff ferreted curiously among a pile of library novels in one corner, and Lady Lane walked softly round the room, testing the fastenings of the windows, pushing a top-heavy log into security and turning off unnecessary lights. The hall clock,

striking eleven, seemed to rouse and inspire them with a common impulse.

"Don't burn the mid-night oil too long," said Lady Lane, brushing Eric's forehead with her lips.

"I simply couldn't sleep, if I went to bed now," he told her. "Good-night, mother. Good-night, everybody."

As the house grew silent he brought in his despatch-box from the hall and began to read through the skeleton of a novel which he had promised himself to write as soon as "The Bomb-Shell" was safely launched. In the second week of the war he had spent an afternoon in a recruiting office with men of all ages and physiques, pressing forward for enrolment. Three over-worked doctors pounded and sounded them, prodding them on to a weighing-machine, measuring their height and chest expansion, testing their eyes. Eric had tried to cheat by memorizing the order of the descending black capitals while he lay on a sofa breathing freely or holding his breath as he was ordered; but the chart was changed before his turn came. When he had dressed, the examining doctor referred him to a row of three weary clerks at a baize-covered table, who informed him that he was rejected. The folio form contained a comment—cardiac something; he could not read the second word. There was no appeal, and, after a moment's indecision, he recognized that there was nothing to do but to go home.

Outside the office his neighbour in the queue overtook and hailed him with the words: "What luck?"

"They've spun me," Eric answered. "There was just a chance that I might slip through in the crowd. . . . What did they say to you?"

"I was spun, too," his companion answered. Then he laughed uneasily and his face was drawn and dazed in the August sunshine. "You wouldn't think you could have much the matter with you and not know anything about it.

I always thought I was a first-class life; I haven't had a day's illness in ten years——"

"What did they say?" Eric asked, as the other hesitated in bewilderment.

"They give me anything between three and six months," he answered, moistening two grey lips. "One of the fellows . . . took me on one side, you know . . . asked me a few questions . . ." He broke off and waved to a taxi which was rolling lazily down Whitehall. "I must go and see my own man. Good-bye."

"Good-bye! Good luck!" Eric cried.

As he walked home he wondered how much composure he would shew if a sentence of death were slapped at him like an overdue bill. He wondered, too, what he would do with those testing, supreme three months, if they were all that he was allowed. Stoicism, hedonism, the faith of his childhood, new-fangled mysticisms would join hands and hold revel round his soul for those twelve weeks, those eighty-four days, those two thousand and sixteen hours. . . . The speculation fascinated him until he almost fancied that the sentence had been passed on him. Gradually he wove a drama round it; line by line it took shape for a book that was to be subtler, finer and more sincere than anything that he had ever written. If only he could find time for six months' uninterrupted work! London had to be not only captured but held; more than ever before, his work was the one thing that mattered. . . .

The clock in the library struck twelve, and he tossed the manuscript skeleton back into his despatch-box. His mind was vaguely disturbed with a sense of duty undone, until he remembered promising to tell Barbara if he heard any news of Jack Waring. For a moment he thought of writing to her; but in fact there was no news, he would have only himself to blame if he re-established communications with her in obedience to a passing whim. She was at Crawleigh,

resting and building up her strength; he would be back in full harness within thirty-six hours, and there would be no room for her madcap incursions into his life.

4

The house was very silent when Eric at length mustered resolution to go to bed. The fragrance of many wood fires warmed the passages and staircase with a drowsy scent; once a distant window rattled tremulously in the wind, the hall clock gathered itself together and hesitated before striking; all else was deep-brooding peace.

He turned out the lights and mounted to his room on tip-toe. There was a fancied sound of tranquil breathing, as he paused outside each door in the long, low passage. He at least was awake; his highly-strung new restlessness would not accord with the placidity of these contented people. Twenty-five years ago, his mother had fetched him from Broadstairs for his first Christmas holidays; and he had been wonderfully glad to see her and to be home again. So it had been every holiday; he started with an afternoon's preliminary exploration, flinging open doors, sniffing the familiar scent of leather bindings, lavender and pine-logs, critically watchful for change. Now the change had come in himself; Agnes had commented on it, his mother and Sybil had noticed it. . . .

His bedroom was as he had known it from childhood; a hard brass bed, white painted chest-of-drawers and wash-hand-stand, threadbare green carpet, flowered and festooned pink-and-white wall-paper. (It *must* have been renewed in twenty-five years, but the pattern was the same.) There was an oak-framed "Light of the World" over the bed, supplemented on the other walls with progressive personal records—eleven podgy, flannelled little boys in quartered chocolate-and-gold caps, guarded and patronized

by a flannelled and whiskered master; four lean-faced, stern young school prefects in gowns and white ties; two hundred shivering and draggled young men and girls, pressing together for warmth in the five o'clock chill of a June morning outside the Town Hall of Oxford. There were two shelves of calf-bound, marbled prize books between the windows, a pair of limp, battered racquets over the mantel-piece and a fumed-oak shield with the university and college arms contiguously inclined like the hearts of two lovers.

Eric shed his coat and waist-coat on the bed, lighted a pipe and prowled ruminatively round the room. Somewhere in the shivering ball-group Jack Waring was to be found, marked out by the blue dress-coat of the Bullingdon. Philpot of B.N.C., Trevor of the House, Loring of the House, Crabtree of Magdalen, Flint of Exeter—Eric turned from one blue-coated sign-post to another until he identified Waring with a crumpled shirt front and disordered hair, cross-legged in the front row. It was a smiling, vacuous, uncharacteristic photograph, and he abandoned it for a bulky album stamped with his initials.

He retreated to the bed and sprawled over a group of the "Mystics." This was a detached and scornful club, exasperating to outsiders, tiresome to its members; Waring and he had joined it at the same time and taken possession of it; their vague home intimacy had ripened into an interested friendship as they strolled back to college from the weekly meetings, once more refighting the frigidly abstract battles in which they had lately engaged from the depths of arm-chairs with their feet on the table and piled dessert-plates in their laps. Without effort or desire Waring had set a fashion and founded a school of icy fastidiousness. Within the limits of college discipline, which he scrupulously observed, Waring dissociated himself from the life and conventions of the college, the abbreviations and colloquialisms of Oxford speech, the slovenly mode of dress

and juvenility of mind. His serenity floated as smoothly over the collective ideas and standards of his fellows as over intercollegiate jealousies; and, as he left the college distantly alone, the college sought him out, elected him to clubs which he seldom attended and to banquets which he overlaid with baffling and frigid aloofness.

When Waring went to the bar, he shared chambers with Eric for four years in Pump Court; and, though they met at most for an hour each day, there resulted an intimacy which neither could replace when Waring moved to the greater comfort of a bedroom at the County Club. For two or three years before the war they hardly met; Eric, disappointed and sore from want of recognition, was shutting himself away from his former friends, while Waring was gathering together a practice and exploring with discrimination the social diversions of London. The war hardly increased the distance between them, and it was only when Jack Waring was reported to be "missing" that Eric realized he had lost his best and oldest friend.

He replaced the album in its shelf and went on undressing. So many friends had already been killed in these first fourteen months of war that he had fallen into a "sooner-or-later" frame of mind about all. Their death ceased to surprise and no longer shocked him as it had once done. Until the war, Jack was always at call. Now, when the war ended, he would *not* come back. . . . Eric shrugged his shoulders and clambered into bed. The Warings were plucky about it, because every day the suspense must become worse; and all the while people would rush up and ask for news, as he had done with Agnes, instead of leaving her to spread the news as soon as she had any. People thought that they were being sympathetic when they were simply tearing the bandage away from the wound to gratify their own curiosity. He would never have asked the question but for his promise to Barbara. . . .

Why, then, was he not letting her know the result? He reached for his despatch-box and settled himself comfortably against the pillows.

"I promised to see if I could get any news of our friend Jack Waring," he began, then hesitated to wonder whether her letters reached Barbara uncensored or whether sharp-eyed, subdued Lady Crawleigh would ask tonelessly, "Who's your letter from, Babs?" Decorum, he decided, should blossom between the lines and shed its waxen petals round each word. . . . *"His sister was dining with us to-night, and I am sorry to say . . ."* *"Did you know him well? He was one of my greatest friends at Oxford. I remember once . . ."*

Eric found himself fondly stringing together anecdotes of Jack until he had overshot the limits of a single sheet; it seemed but a moment before he was leaning out of bed to reach a third. *"You must forgive me, if I have rather let myself go about him,"* he ended. *"I remember the first weeks of the war, when I had a nervous breakdown. His father's place is about two miles from here, and he used to come round and sit with me. I've only to shut my eyes to see him standing by the fireplace, with his elbow on the mantel-piece and his cheek on his hand, talking to me. And I'd give a great deal to have him here to-night."*

"But I'm afraid I'm occupying an unfair proportion of your time and strength at a season when you've faithfully promised to take care of yourself and to have a proper rest. I hope you didn't get carried beyond Crawleigh station; it's been rather on my conscience that I got out at Winchester instead of coming on with you the whole way. Are you aware that you collapsed from sheer exhaustion almost before we were out of Waterloo? I thought you'd fainted and, as you have my only flask of brandy, I had a bad fright. Isn't it worth while to take a little care of yourself? You're so intolerably vain that I needn't remind you that you're

very young, extraordinarily lovely at times, very clever and utterly wasted. However, that's your affair, and you're not likely to be much impressed by any advice I give you, nor am I much impressed by my right to give you advice. If I hear any news of Jack, you may be sure that I shall let you know. Now, good-night, good-bye and a speedy recovery."

In reading through his letter, Eric could not help feeling that, where he had sown decorum, a certain intimacy had shot up. But at three o'clock in the morning he could not bother about that.

5

In the first drowsy moments after waking, Eric realized that he was starting at a disadvantage. It was half-past ten. He had therefore missed breakfast, disorganized the housemaids' programme for the day and made himself too late to accompany his mother to church.

"I seem to have broken all the rules of the place before getting out of bed," he told himself, as he rang for hot water.

Then he laughed as he recalled an old "Punch" drawing of an intoxicated reveller in a Tube lift, who also contrived simultaneously to break all the rules by smoking, by not "standing clear of the gates" and, pre-eminently, by not being beware of pickpockets. The laugh put him in good humour and reminded him that good humour must be his sword and shield, if he hoped to get back to London that night without a struggle. He sauntered in search of his brother with a razor in one hand and a shaving-brush in the other to ask which night he would like to dine and have his promised box at the Regency.

When he entered the dining-room, a pencilled note in a distantly familiar writing was lying by his plate.

"Now you MUST admit that my intelligence department is

good," he read in slanting, irregular strokes which hinted at a recumbent position and a writing-block balanced against the knees. "*You never told me your address. I didn't know where to look for you in the telephone book, you were utterly lost. Eric, will you believe me? I carried the telephone into bed with me; I said, 'Trunks, please,' and Trunks Please said 'Honk!' (Why do they always say 'Honk'? I believe they're Masons, or else they've always just woken up.) Well, I said 'Honk!' too, and asked for your number in Ryder Street; and THEN I found out your address in the country. Don't you think it was rather clever of me? And, dear Eric, don't you think it was VERY sweet of me? I wanted to thank you for something I expect you're quite unconscious of. (What a sentence to throw at the head of a rising dramatist!) I mean your gentleness and care for me yesterday. I always know I'm so safe with you, Eric.*"

"I'm obeying you to the letter. We've got rather an amusing party here; Gerry Deganway and Sally Farwell, my cousin Johnnie Carstairs (perhaps ONE pinch too much Foreign Office), Bobbie Pentyre, who's on his last leave before going out, his rather tiresome mother, the immaculate George Oakleigh. . . ." Her pen strayed into mischievous comments and absurd stories about the house-party. "*But this bores you,*" she broke off abruptly. "*I felt all this week as if I'd been sharing everything with you so extraordinarily. But no one shall say that I don't know when I'm becoming tedious! What I wanted to tell you was this; and I was led astray by this mob of people. I've washed my hands of them! I'm in bed—bed at 7.15 POST MERIDIEM (is that right?) and I'm staying here. I'm honestly resting. But—(a new sheet for this)—I've GOT to be in London next week—Thursday—for a happy day with the dentist. I shall be all alone, the house will be shut up and everything will be as uncomfortable and depressing as it*"

can be. Don't you think it's almost a duty for you to come and dine? I'll have the dusting-sheets in my room lifted up, and we'll crawl underneath them and eat hard-boiled eggs in our fingers off the corner of the table. And I'll play to you; I might even sing to you; in general terms I shall be very sweet to you and, if you don't come, I shall know it's because you're afraid of falling in love with me."

Eric smiled to himself, as he pocketed the letter and prospected for note-paper and an unoccupied table.

"Your picnic dinner sounds most attractive," he wrote. "I shall be delighted to come. It is so characteristic of you not to mention a time that I hesitate to point out the omission. I shall come at 8.0, unless you tell me to the contrary. And I shall insist on your singing. Good-bye. Take care of yourself."

He tossed the letter into the box in the hall, but took it out again immediately. There was too much idle curiosity in the house already. No one would accept his picture of Babs as he saw her; assuredly no one would believe his account of their relationship, if he were in a mood or state to give it. He put on an overcoat and walked, with the confirmed Londoner's shivering hatred of the country in autumn, to the tumble-down shanty which did duty as general store and post office to the hamlet of Lashmar.

Once nerved to face the wet roads and penetrating chill, Eric decided to acquire merit by walking through the woods and meeting the church party on its return. Lady Lane had already shewn off her "sailor son" to the exiguous congregation; it was the turn of "my eldest son, the author, you know," to submit. He could hear all about Basil and generally popularize himself so that he would be allowed to leave that night without protest.

His mood was so radiant that he achieved his effect before the end of luncheon. As Geoff drove him to the station, he almost seemed to have enjoyed himself and to be

leaving with regret. . . . Winchester, Basingstoke, Vauxhall, the river and the Houses of Parliament gave him successive thrills of pleasure, as though he had been away from England for years. Pride of possession seized him when he entered Ryder Street; as he shut the front door and looked at his black-framed prints and lustre bowls, he felt like a miser locking himself within his treasure-house to feast his eyes on the signs of his material victory over fate. So many people allowed life to control them instead of controlling life. And, when they had failed through their own inertia, they invented an external destiny to save their faces. Man created God to have somewhere to put the blame. . . .

There was an average pile of letters on his library table. Lady Poynter hoped to get some rather amusing people to lunch on Thursday; could he bear to come again? So sweet of him, if he would. Mrs. O'Rane wrote vaguely of a party which she had in prospect, without apparently knowing very much about it: "*a sort of house-warming. I'm not asking you to meet any one in particular, because I don't know who'll be there. It'll be a mob, I warn you. I'm inviting my friends, my husband's inviting his; they'll probably quarrel, and there's sure not to be room for all. Whatever you do, have a good dinner before you come. It doesn't sound attractive, does it? But these things are often nothing like so bad as one fears beforehand. I propose to enjoy MYSELF.*"

Eric was amused by her candour and decided to look in for a few minutes.

Lady Maitland, complaining that "*Margaret Poynter always ACCAPARER-s my nice young men,*" invited him to shew his loyalty by coming to dine on Friday. "*Babs Neave is coming,*" she added.

As he had intended to spend Sunday evening in the country, he was absolved from all work and could give undi-

vided attention to the dinner which his cook had improvised. (But he must get an ice-safe capable of holding an adequate week-end supply. Dinner with only a choice of sherry and of gin and bitters, with no opportunity for a cocktail suggested "roughing it" to his mind.) He dined with a book propped against its silver reading-stand leisurely and warm after his bath, comfortable in a soft shirt and wadded smoking jacket.

After dinner he unlocked a branded cedar-wood cabinet, the first that he had ever bought, and looked lovingly at the cigars, rich, dull-brown and ineffably fragrant, bundle pressed shoulder to shoulder with bundle. A new stock of wine had still to be entered in the cellar-book; and he had to find places on his shelves for Hatchard's last consignment. It was not yet easy to realize that, until the success of his play—six thousand pounds sterling in eight calendar months—a new book had been an event. . . .

For a happy hour he arranged and rearranged. At the end, surveying his handiwork with undisguised pleasure, he thought of the bizarre night when Babs Neave had forced her way in. He could still hardly believe that it had occurred. And yet, without shutting his eyes, he could almost see the child, deadly pale, tired, delighted and wholly unexplained, bending forward with her wonderful white arms outstretched to catch poor Agnes Waring's horse-shoe paper-weight, laughing one moment, crying the next, kissing him the moment after. And how she seemed to be in love with him. . . .

He took out a foot-rule and measured the space under the windows for two possible new book-cases. He would need them soon; and they would make the room look better filled. It was a beautiful room, a beautiful flat. From every point of view he was leading a very beautiful life. . . .

The clock struck eleven; and his parlour-maid came in

with a syphon, decanter and glasses. He did not drink whiskey once a month, but the tray added a roundness and finish which the Spartans at Lashmar Mill-House were incapable of appreciating. Were they Spartans—or simply people without his instinct for life?

He filled a tumbler with soda-water and subsided into his deepest arm-chair, looking lazily round the room, drawing pleurably at his cigar and wrapping himself in the softest down of contentment. His diary was within reach, and he thought over his abbreviated week-end. Agnes Waring had dropped out of his life; Barbara had never come into it. There was nothing to record but the names of his mother's guests at dinner. . . .

"There are few things so exhausting as the quiet of the country."—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTERMEZZO

What hadst thou to do being born,
Mother, when winds were at ease
As a flower of the spring-time of corn,
A flower of the foam of the seas?
For bitter thou wast from thy birth,
Aphrodite, a mother of strife;
For before thee some rest was on earth
A little respite from tears
A little pleasure of life;
For life was not then as thou art,
But as one that waxeth in years
Sweet-spoken, a fruitful wife;
Earth had no thorn, and desire
No sting, neither death any dart;
What hadst thou to do amongst these,
Thou, clothed with a burning fire,
Thou, girt with sorrow of heart,
Thou sprung of the seed of the seas
As an ear from a seed of corn
As a brand plucked forth of a pyre,
As a ray shed forth of the moon
For division of soul and disease,
For a dart and a sting and a thorn?
What ailed thee then to be born?
SWINBURNE: "ATALANTA IN CALYDON."

I

MORAL delinquency in England, if of sufficiently ancient lineage, grows venial with the years and, if carried out with adequate ruthlessness or at least success, may quickly find itself invested with grandeur. No one boasts of his own illegitimacy, but most men like it to be known that an ancestress, whose memory is kept green, once enjoyed royal favour. No man tells his guests that they are eating stolen

food from stolen plate in a stolen house; but many will admit, without imposing a bond of secrecy, that their great-great-grandfathers went to India to seek their fortune and apparently found it. "He that goes out an insignificant boy in a few years returns a great Nabob," said Burke, without dwelling on the intermediate stages. They will admit almost as readily that their grandfather reluctantly parted with land to the end that railways might be built, or that their fathers ran the blockade and supplied the South and the slave-owners, hazardously and romantically, with munitions of war.

The Neave fortunes had their origin in the character and position of Lord Chancellor Crawleigh; and history has dealt faithfully with him. John, first baron, acquired the Abbey from a misguided supporter of the '15 and left it with sufficient means for its upkeep to his grandson William, the second baron and first viscount, who built on sure foundations. Common sense and a certain practical alertness in the halcyon days of the Enclosure Acts did nothing to diminish the patrimony of Charles, fourth baron, third viscount and first earl, though the estate came to be temporarily encumbered when the good fellowship of John, the second earl, won him the costly regard of the Regent. At a time when the House of Commons was pulling one of its long faces over a periodical schedule of the Prince's debts, a Garter became vacant; and His Royal Highness, with no other means of marking his affectionate gratitude, secured it for his friend with a further step to the coveted rank of marquess. Thereafter the public life of the family was characterized by honour and integrity; and the Garter, re-bestowed as soon as surrendered, became a habit. The second marquess held a sinecure under Lord Aberdeen; another flitted to and fro in shadowy retirement as a Lord-in-Waiting; a third, exploring the United States for the broadening of his mind, married an American wife.

The union infused so much new blood into the declining, short-lived stock that there seemed no limit to the energy and success of the heir. Charles, fifth marquess, was a member of parliament in his twenty-second year, an under-secretary when he was twenty-six and Governor-General of Canada before he was thirty-five. Thereafter, having got him abroad, succeeding governments vied with one another to keep him abroad. The vice-royalty of India followed almost automatically; he spent two years as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to oblige his party leaders and was now in the full vigour of middle age with nothing to do. The House of Lords offered no opportunity to an incurably bad debater; and the radicals by destroying the constitution, bullying the king and playing with revolution had made it a place of arid pomp, whose futility took away something of a man's dignity every time that he went there. Nevertheless, once a viceroy, always a viceroy, as his daughter sometimes reminded him. Lord Crawleigh ruled Berkeley Square and Crawleigh Abbey as though he were still in India, as though, too, he were suppressing the Mutiny single-handed. "Once a mutineer, always a mutineer," Lady Barbara would occasionally say of herself.

This week-end she had irritated her parents by choosing a train convenient neither to family nor guests, by arriving speechless with fatigue and by retiring to her bedroom and announcing that she would probably stay there. Lady Crawleigh felt that prudence, after so long delay, might have timed its coming more opportunely; a houseful of young people could be trusted, in dealing with her sentences, to complete the ruin which her husband had begun; but late hours, excitement and the legacy of her illness had reduced Barbara's strength until Dr. Gaisford pronounced that he could not answer for the result if any pressure were put upon her.

Though the windows were now thickly curtained and a

bright fire was burning, Barbara could never come into her bedroom without a shiver. In the spring and summer of 1915, when Crawleigh Abbey was a military hospital, she had worked by night and lain awake by day, deliberately and with the sun shining on her face, for fear of dreaming. Madness or death could be no worse than the torture of being pitilessly and unceasingly watched when she knew that she was only dreaming but could not wake. Of late the form of her dreams had changed, growing less defined; there was no longer the old accusing pair of eyes to reproach and spy on her as soon as the room was in darkness, but she was conscious of vague presences which she could not clearly see. After fainting in the train a month before, she had heard Eric's voice in her sleep, though she could not recognize a face which she had never seen; none of her dream-faces had features. There was a shadow somewhere in all her visions of Eric; some day she feared that the shadow would take form, the eyes would return to watch her. . . .

The fire was so bright that the room grew no darker when she turned off the light; and, though she placed a coloured handkerchief over her eyes, it gave her no protection. When she pulled it impatiently away, the glare was so fierce that she could not see the familiar bookcases and chairs. Gradually the whole room was enveloped in a sheet of flame, and in the midst she saw a gigantic figure on a throne.

"God," she whispered—and knew that she was dead and had come to be judged.

The throne was familiar from an old picture in Siena; God was the Ancient of Days, drawn by Blake for the Book of Job. Strange that, after all, these stories were true. . . . She wondered why He was old or, being old, why He was no older. . . . The white flame beat merci-

lessly upon her eyes, and she could see that they were alone in Space.

God was waiting for her to confess. . . .

It was idle to confess when God was omniscient, and she kept her lips obstinately closed.

But God and she were alone in Time. He had sat for an eternity before she came to the judgement-seat; He would wait for an eternity and condemn her for an eternity. . . .

"Vanity. . . . I suppose that's what you want me to say." She wondered whether her voice would carry through Space; she was no bigger than God's right hand . . . alone . . . and naked. "I've always been spoiled, and that makes any one vain. Some allowance . . ."

It was idle to excuse herself when God was omniscient.

"I *didn't* realize what I was doing." (God must know that she was speaking the truth now.) "He never missed an opportunity of hurting me—quite unfairly; I've nothing to be ashamed of before I met him. I made up my mind to shew him I wasn't quite as bad as he thought. He . . . fell in love with me and wanted to marry me. . . . I was taken by surprise . . . mad. . . . I didn't know what I was saying, I told him I couldn't marry any one who wasn't a Catholic. . . ."

Catholic . . .

Barbara stopped short to wonder what God must think of all the jarring sects which laid claim to His exclusive revelation. The Ancient of Days, God the Father, Jehovah, Allah. . . . She had always wondered what He would make of His fratricidal followers. Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox. . . . What must Christ make of the bitter fanatics who swam through blood to a world of universal love?

She had lost her way in the confession; and God brooded in silence over Space and Time, ignoring her, forgetting

her. She sank to the ground, hiding her face in her hands and wondering when she had died. Perhaps God had waited until Jack Waring was killed, so that he might testify against her. . . .

"I know it was a lie," she broke out suddenly, "but I *didn't* realize what I was doing. The next thing . . . Is this Hell? I always felt I was going through Hell on earth. That night . . . I didn't see or hear from Jack for three months; I thought he'd given me up. I was happy for the first time since I'd met him. Then he followed me into the country and asked me again if I'd marry him. He said he *was* a Catholic now. He'd believed me, he'd done this for me, perjured himself. . . . I remember saying to myself "If there *is* a God . . ." I didn't know. . . . "If he *has* a soul to lose. . . ." I couldn't undo it. I did what I could for him, I wrote and said I'd marry him, I swore it by the sign of the Cross. . . . He went out to the war, he never answered; he's killed now. . . . I don't know what you're going to do with me. I've *been* punished. It can't be any satisfaction to you to send me out of my mind. For a year I've been tortured. Now I was just beginning to forget and to be happy. I suppose you want to take *that* away. . . . I *didn't* realize. . . . Why *shouldn't* I be happy?"

The dim figure on the throne made no answer, and Barbara began to crawl forward. Perhaps God had not heard. . . . But she would spend years crawling through Space. . . .

"I want to get it over. No punishment's as bad as this suspense. *You* know that. . . . Won't you tell me what I'm to do . . . ?"

She crawled forward again, though her knees were aching. Above her loomed God's foot-stool; and she touched it reverently, then beat upon it furiously in the hope that God might rise and kill her again . . . for ever. . . . The

sheet of flame marched nearer until it scorched her eyes. Space and Time shrank and were consumed until she found herself kneeling upright, staring wildly at the fire and beating with open palms on the wooden end of the bed.

Barbara fell backwards, pulling the clothes up to her chin.

"Another second . . . and I should have gone mad," she whispered.

Downstairs some one had thrown open a window, some one was playing a piano. She turned on the light and rang for her maid.

"I shall get up for dinner after all," she said. "I mean, I shan't. . . . I don't know what I'm talking about. What—I mean—is: I shall get out of *bed* for dinner, but I shan't go down. *That's* clear, isn't it? What's the time?"

"Eight o'clock, my lady."

Then her dream had lasted less than five minutes. . . .

"I'm going to sleep. I shan't want any dinner. Will you bring the telephone in here?"

The maid left the room in bewilderment at the conflicting orders and sought counsel of the housekeeper. Ten minutes later Lady Crawleigh came in to find Barbara in bed with the telephone tucked under one arm and the receiver to her ear. She finished some request for an address, nodded as the answer was given and lifted the instrument to a table by her side.

"Well, my dear, you seem to have given poor Merton a fright," said Lady Crawleigh. "Is anything the matter?"

"I never felt better in my life," answered Barbara.

"Are you coming down to dinner?"

"I don't think I'm well enough for that. . . . You can get on without me. If things seem to hang fire, get Gerry Deganway to give imitations of His Excellency."

Lady Crawleigh bridled at the suggestion.

"That's not at all a respectful way to speak of your father," she observed reprovingly.

"Well, His ex-Excellency, then. That no better? Sorry. He's very amusing—Gerry, I mean. Why not get father to give imitations of Gerry? In its way, that ought to be just as funny."

Her mother advanced reproachfully to the bed and laid her hand upon the rail.

"If you're not feeling well," she said with incontrovertible logic, "you ought to go to sleep instead of telephoning to people and writing to people. If you're all right, you ought to help with these tiresome creatures. They're *your* guests."

Barbara felt her own pulse and sighed.

"I'm well enough to write one letter," she said, "and perhaps to get up in time for lunch to-morrow."

Then she hunted among the pillows for a pencil and addressed an envelope to "*Eric Lane Esq^{re}, Lashmar Mill-House, Lashmar, Near Winchester, Hants.*"

She was already tired; perhaps, if she could fix her thoughts on Eric until she fell asleep, she would be spared a second vision of judgement. A dressing-gong sounded in the distance, and she debated whether to abandon her letter to Eric and go down. Gerald Deganway would be simperingly sympathetic. "Your mother tells me you're not feeling very grand" (odious phrase). "Poor you!" (Damnable phrase, damnable creature—with his insecure eye-glass and plastered flaxen hair!) Johnny Carstairs would be pontifical and pretentious—"The unhappy Foreign Office comes in for all the kicks. There's a body of three-pound-a-week gentlemen in Fleet Street who'd enforce a *real* blockade, 'leave it to the Navy,' don't you know, all that sort of thing. I'm aware of them; I sometimes wish I could have a heart-to-heart talk with them. . . ." By staying in bed she was at least keeping the promise that

she had given to Eric; the sense of surrender was a novel experiment in emotion.

She finished the letter and switched off the light. Darkness was not going to usher in faces to-night. Her soul felt healed.

"You absurd darling child!"

She whispered the words aloud and felt warm tears overbrimming her eyes. She loved him for his extraordinary callow youth—which had carried the chaste chivalry of sixteen to the age of twice sixteen; she loved his little occasional tender gleams of womanliness. . . . And he was so easy to mystify and tease. She felt the warmth and the taut muscles of his arm round her body as he led her home across St. James' Park, her head on his shoulder, sleeping, secure and forgetful.

"Dear Eric, I wish you were here now!" she murmured.

Lord Crawleigh, indignant that Barbara should desert her own party the first night, but vaguely disquieted that she was ill enough to go to bed of her own volition, peeped into her room on his way down to dinner. There was no answer to his jerky, sharp call of "Barbara" and he turned on the light. Her eyes were closed, but she was smiling; he walked to the bed to make certain that she was not trying any of her tricks on him.

"Barbara!"

"Yes, darling?"

She opened her eyes, and their drowsy contentment faded away.

"I only came to see if you were asleep."

"I'm not—now," she answered wistfully.

"Well, why don't you *get* some decent sleep? You racket about and overtax your strength and excite yourself. . . . And this is the result!"

"I'll do my best, father."

As he creaked out of the room, she shut her eyes tight

and tried in despair to woo herself back to the moment of half-consciousness when Eric drew her cloak across her chest and she roused to ask him sleepily "Am I coming undressed?"

2

Barbara rang for tea at noon and came down to luncheon in a house which was gratifyingly demoralized by her absence. Her father had spent Sunday morning in his study, writing letters; her mother had carried the more devout members of the party to mass and from mass to a vague, bored exploration of the garden, where they could be seen scattered on the lowest terrace, trying to make friends with an unresponsive peacock; the men, headed by Pentyre, were warmly entrenched round the smoking-room fire in a blue tobacco-haze and a litter of Sunday papers. George Oakleigh, in naval uniform, was unashamedly sleeping in a deep window-embrasure, his mouth open and his eyeglasses on his knees. Deganway and Carstairs were arguing in subdued tones and seemed as vacantly uninterested as Pentyre, who had exhausted the *feuilleton* of his paper and was studying the advertisements.

She was pleased by the stir with which her entrance galvanized them into alertness, by Oakleigh's sympathetic enquiries, even by Deganway's critical examination of her dress.

"Well, make the most of me, everybody," she said. "I'm going back to bed immediately after lunch. What's everybody doing?"

"I've been asleep," Oakleigh answered contentedly.

Barbara looked round her and wrinkled her nose.

"What are you *going* to do?" she pursued.

"I should like to go *on* sleeping. . . ."

"Come for a walk, Babs," interrupted Pentyre. "It's my last leave——"

"Then you'd better rest instead of working on my emotions. George, on the other hand, never gets any exercise at the Admiralty, and, as he's never been here before, I think I shall take him round the house. Besides, he hasn't *asked* me to do anything. Come on, George!"

Oakleigh rose with sufficient alacrity and accompanied her for an hour through the ruins of the Abbey, the Elizabethan reconstruction and the Georgian incrustation. Knowing Barbara, he had secured what he wanted by pretended indifference, though he was less interested in hall and refectory, Prior's house and dormitory than in her knowledge of architecture and early English furniture.

"Another of my accomplishments," she laughed. "George, what sort of reputation *have* I got? A man was so surprised the other day to find that I could play the piano and sing. . . ."

"I know what *I* think of you," he answered. "Possibly you know it too."

Barbara looked away abstractedly, as though she had not heard him. Ever since her illness, George had shewn her a tender devotion; and, when Sonia Dainton and her other friends had succumbed to the war-epidemic of marriage, she had fancied that it would be very restful to marry him. The mood lasted for a week, and it was in this time that she had invited him to the Abbey. Then a dream, of which she could remember few details, had shattered the lazy romance which she was weaving; there was a shadow which she knew would take form as Jack Waring, there was a hint of the wild oath which she had taken when she was mad; and she had decided that God was punishing her by opening her eyes to happiness and then throwing a bar of shadow across her path as she struggled to reach it. Those were the days when she heard that Jack was

missing, the nights when she prayed to hear that he was dead. Now that George was at hand, she did not want him; she might find peace by marrying him, but she would find nothing more. . . .

"Dear George! You think I'm perfect, don't you?"

"Perfection is meant to be more admired than loved."

"I've nothing but my imperfections to make people love me."

"That's a woman's way of marrying on her debts. . . . You're better, Babs, than when I came to see you in London. I hope you're—happier."

"Ah, if only I could *undo*. . . ."

She broke off, and George looked at her cautiously to see whether she was trying him with the pose of conscience-stricken penitent, already a little out-moded after fourteen months of war.

"You certainly had your share of scrapes, but there was nothing discreditable in them. Too much vitality——"

She spread out her hands, white and transparent in the sun-light.

"I'd *done* everything else! Being with father everywhere. . . . And I was driven into it by opposition. I must have been a mule in a previous incarnation. D'you know, if father says he's coming here by the 4.10, I *have* to come by the 5.40, however inconvenient it may be to everybody—just to assert myself?"

"But that wasn't the only reason," George suggested.

"What d'you mean?"

She had ceased to smile, and two faint lines of annoyance were visible between her eye-brows.

"I'm sorry. It was no business of mine," said George apologetically.

"I don't mind *you*. But it was no business of the Deganway creature. Can't you break his eye-glass or cut a piece

off the end of his nose, George? Did he tell you who I came down with?"

"Deganway is always thorough in his investigations. I'm sorry I mentioned it; I was only teasing you."

"I don't mind *you*," she repeated. "But it does make things so impossible if father and mother go about fancying. . . . Come to lunch! I'll be in time for one meal," she cried, seizing his arm and hurrying him the length of the echoing refectory.

At luncheon and recurrently through the afternoon Barbara wondered how far Deganway's gossiping tongue had already prejudiced her relations with Eric. If he heard that they were being discussed, he would in all probability strike an attitude and declare that he could not be a party to compromising her any longer. At present he was too novel a distraction for her to spare him easily; already he had become so important to her life that she had forgotten George Oakleigh and the thrill of gratitude and elation which she had felt when he began sluggishly but surely to fall in love with her.

The house-party had dispersed before she came down next day. Breakfast in bed was a dull meal, because she had hoped to find an unsolicited letter from Eric—about anything. She had to wait until the second post, and that only brought her the briefest possible acceptance of her invitation. Not until Tuesday did she receive the long letter which he had written on Saturday night. And the intimacy and tenderness of it were half spoiled even then, for Lady Crawleigh followed her maid into the room, enquired affectionately how Barbara was feeling and settled down to read instructive extracts from *The Times*.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Crawleigh Abbey seemed suddenly very big and deserted. Barbara secured a trunk call to Eric's flat on Monday night; but, after twenty minutes to wonder why she shewed so little pride and

whether he would be angry with her, a faint voice answered that Mr. Lane was dining out. Something which she could not analyze told her that she would be taking an unfair risk with his affection, if she tried to communicate with him again. She could hardly understand why she was staying in bed and taking so great care of herself; but it was Eric's wish, and she had felt a leap at the heart when he interested himself in her welfare. If he only knew, it would do her much more good to be with him, to tease him and laugh at him and set him attitudinizing and then to charm a word or gesture of affection from him . . . and then to laugh at him again and see him perplexed and exasperated. She was very grateful to him for bringing a new interest into her life. . . .

Little Val Arden had once said, years before the war, that she would find her greatest emotion on the day when she lost her heart. . . .

But it were useless to fall in love with Eric if she could not make him return her love. . . .

Thursday seemed as far away as the throne of God in that ghastly nightmare. . . . She wrote Mrs. Shelley a letter which she hoped would not read so transparently false as it seemed to her in writing.

"Dearest Marion, I feel so rude for never having apologized either for running away myself so early or for dragging Eric Lane away from your delightful party. I was feeling dreadfully tired. I'm in bed now; in fact, I've hardly been out of bed since I came here on Saturday, and he put a pistol to my head and insisted on taking me home. I shall be in London for one or two nights next week. Will you shew that you forgive us by inviting us again? Your affectionate Barbara."

It seemed a pity not to exploit a good idea to the full, and she next wrote to her cousin Amy Loring.

"You said the other day that you had never met Eric

Lane, though he was a great friend of Jim's. He was at Margaret Poynter's the other day when I was there. Would you like me to invite him to dine one night next week (I shall be up in London for two or three days)? Ring me up between tea and dinner on Thursday. . . ."

There remained Colonel Grayle, who had jerked out, as she left the "Divorce" with George Oakleigh: "Clever play! Rather like to meet the author. Decent feller, I believe." If she met him again, she could offer to bring about a meeting. . . .

It was regrettable that she and Eric knew so few people in common.

3

Before leaving her dentist, Barbara telephoned to remind Eric of his promise to dine with her. His answering voice was almost audibly guilty, for the engagement had been allowed to fade from his mind, though his watchful secretary would have seen to it later that he kept his appointment.

When he arrived, the house was eerily dark and deserted. The door was opened by a girl in a black dress, presumably—from the absence of cap and apron—Barbara's own maid, and he was conducted through a twilight hall where the great chandeliers were draped in dusting-sheets, up a side staircase and over more dusting-sheets to the door of the boudoir. Here the evidence of desolation ended in vast bowls of autumn roses, a log fire, blazing electric lights and the beginnings of inevitable untidiness—ripped envelopes on the floor, a silk cloak in one chair and gloves in another and, on the hearth-rug, a chinchilla muff with a grey Persian kitten asleep half inside it.

Eric knelt down and played with the kitten until the bedroom door opened and Barbara hurried in.

"Glad to see me, Eric?" she whispered.

"I've—noticed you weren't here," he answered. "You're looking better, Babs. And I like your kitten."

"I brought her up to chaperon you," she explained. "Are you going to be bored, dining alone with me? I warned you what it would be like." She pointed doubtfully towards a table set for two. "We put the dirty plates on the floor, and my maid will take them away when she brings coffee. I've only her and one kitchen-maid to keep me alive. Eric, I've been looking forward to this most enormously. That was a sweet letter you wrote me from Lashmar—I love the name! Lashmar Mill-House—You were very fond of Jack, I could see. Shall we begin?"

Eric looked at the photograph on the mantel-piece before sitting down.

"He was the greatest friend I ever had," he answered wistfully. "An unusual character. If you liked him, he could make you do anything he pleased. . . . Did you see much of him? His sister was surprised to find that you knew him."

Barbara finished her soup without answering. Then, as Eric took away her empty plate, she looked up at him with a slight frown of perplexity.

"Did he never mention me to you?" she asked. "Somehow—I thought you understood, Eric. Didn't any one else tell you? There are so many stories about me——"

"I honestly don't know what you're referring to," said Eric, laying down his knife and fork in perplexity.

She looked at him closely with eyebrows raised.

"When we discussed the photograph, and I asked you to find out anything you could . . . Didn't you see that Jack meant a great deal to me?"

The colour had fled from her cheeks, and she was sitting with head bent forward, deeply preoccupied with the food on her plate. Gazing blankly at her, Eric tried to imagine

what kind of intimacy she could have formed with the elusive celibate who never spoke to women or discussed them. . . .

Something was expected of him. . . .

"It never occurred to me," he said lamely. "Of course, Jack never mentioned a word——"

"*He wouldn't*. . . . Jim knew, but *he* wouldn't either. . . . There was no one else to give me away. . . . I've always been afraid of saying something *in* my sleep. . . . I want to *forget, forget*. . . ."

The words came out in jerks, with a sobbing struggle for breath between. Her head was bent so low that she did not see him rise and come round to her side; a startled shiver passed through her, as he knelt down and put his arm round her shoulders, drawing her to him until her cheek rested against his.

"Babs, dear! Darling Babs!" he whispered. "Don't——"

"Ah, don't tell me not to cry, Eric! I've kept it down, I *have* been brave, but it's sending me mad!"

She was sliding limply off the chair, as though her bones had been broken in company with her pride and resistance. He led her to a sofa and knelt beside her, sometimes gently chafing her hands, sometimes drying the slow tears which rolled down her cheeks. Once or twice she tried to speak, but he hushed her to silence.

"Darling, you must stop now," he commanded as the tears ceased and she began to sob drily. "When I said 'Don't——,' I was going to say 'Don't stop crying, don't mind me; it will do you good.' But you'll make yourself ill, if you go on." He caught her wrist and gripped it. "Put your feet up, because I'm going to push the sofa to the fire. . . . Your shoulders are frozen. . . . Now I'm going to bring you the lobster. . . . And you haven't had anything to drink yet."

After a single weak protest she entered into the spirit

of his fireside picnic and by the time that he had seated himself cross-legged on the floor she was laughing at his apprehensive care in keeping his trousers from losing their crease. When coffee was brought in, he gave her a cigarette and raised her hand clumsily to his lips.

"I'm sorry I've been unsympathetic, Babs." There was no answer, and he could see her staring into the fire with eyes that were covered with a film of tears. "I *didn't* understand, I thought you were ill and over-excited, or I'd have bitten out my tongue before I snubbed you and told you that you were a nuisance. Will you forgive me?"

The film of tears gathered into shining drops and rolled mournfully down her cheeks.

"As if *I* had anything to forgive. . . . You'll never speak to me again, if I tell you. And if I don't tell you . . . If I don't tell you, I could never look you in the eyes."

Barbara stared at the fire, and for a moment it seemed as though she were again making confession at the judgement-seat of God.

"I met Jack two years ago," she began hurriedly. "He'd been saying things that hurt me, so I arranged to stay with the Pentyres when he was there and I made him fall in love with me. One night at Ross House he asked me to marry him. I . . . I don't defend myself; I'd never dreamed of marrying him. Even then it wouldn't have been so bad, if I'd told him the truth, if I'd admitted that I'd led him on to punish him. Instead . . . I looked for some excuse which would save *my* face; I said 'But you aren't a Catholic, are you?' I never saw him again till my cousin Jim Loring's ball just before the war. . . ."

At the memory of their meeting Barbara shuddered until she could not speak. There had been no hint of warning; she was in the drawing-room after dinner when Lady Knightrider's car arrived from Raglan, and Jack put his

head in at the door to ask if he might have supper with her.

"I asked him what he'd been doing with himself all the summer," Barbara went on with a spurt. "He said, 'I've just been received into your Church.'"

She paused and stared in terror round the room as though it were changing under her eyes into the haunted banquetting-hall of Loring Castle.

"I couldn't *spea*k. . . . The music stopped, I heard people clapping, it went on again. Then there were voices on the stairs, and Jack asked me again to marry him. I said I couldn't. He wanted to know why. Then . . . then I *had* to tell him I wasn't in love with him. Then he saw everything."

Barbara looked up quickly, with her hand to her forehead as though to ward off a blow. It was then that Jack stared at her, through her, into her soul; and his eyes had followed her ever since. At first she braced herself to meet his attack, but it was not the occasion for conventional recriminations. If a man's soul could be imperilled, she had handed Jack's over to damnation. God . . . Hell . . . Immortal souls. . . . She had not believed in them till that moment, but there was always that eerie hundredth chance that they existed.

Eerie. . . .

Her attention was captured by the word and wandered away in search of a missing line.

*"It's like those eerie stories nurses tell,
Of how some actor on a stage played Death,
With pasteboard crown, sham orb and tinselled dart,
And called himself the monarch of the world;
Then, going in the tire-room afterward,
Because the play was done, to shift himself,
Got touched upon the sleeve familiarly,
The moment he had shut the closet door,
By Death himself."*

Jack had sat silent and motionless, too much dazed even to rise and leave her. There was a sound of more voices in the hall, and Charlie Framlingham waltzed into the room with Jack Summertown and subsided at a table by the door. They had hardly begun supper when George Oakleigh entered to say that war had changed from speculation to probability and that officers were being mobilized. Then at last Jack roused, and she had only a moment for making amends.

"Jack was talking about applying for a commission," she went on. "I went out on to the terrace, I wanted to *think*. . . . It was no good *apologizing*. . . . They got into the car, one after another. I was still trying to think. Jack came down the steps. . . . And then I saw that there was only one reparation I *could* make; I had to offer myself to him, even if he hit me in the mouth. . . . I didn't care about my vanity now; I called out to him, but the others were making such a noise. . . . The car started, I was blinded by the head-lights. When I could see again, there was only a little pin-point of red light. I shouted, ran. . . . Then I came back. When every one else had gone to bed, I told Jim. And I thought he'd have killed me. . . . And then I swore solemnly that Jack should have me if he wanted me. I wrote to him, and he never answered my letter. I tried to see him. And now . . ."

Eric rose and stood by the fire, resting his head on his hand.

"You offered the only reparation in your power," he said at length.

"What am I to do?" she asked dizzily. "I want peace! . . . I told him that, whatever happened, however long the war went on, I should always be here, always ready to keep my promise, always prepared to make what amends I could. . . . I've dedicated myself. If he's alive, until he tells me that he rejects me . . ."

With a sigh of exhaustion, she slipped forward, turning as she fell and burying her arms and face. The rose in her hair trembled to the heaving of her shoulders and scattered a shower of petals over the cushions of the sofa.

4

"And I meant to be so sweet, I meant to make you enjoy yourself until you thought me quite irresistible," Barbara laughed through her tears, kneeling upright on the sofa and dabbing at her eyes. "And then I was going to tell you that I have to come up to my dentist once a week for about two months; and I shall be all alone and I wanted you to promise to make me happy—like to-night."

Her recovery was as sudden as her collapse. Still kneeling with her hands clasped behind her head, she leaned forward until he had to catch her in his arms.

"I don't feel I've made you particularly happy to-night," said Eric, bending one arm into an angle for her head and throwing the other round her waist to hold her on to the sofa.

"I feel as if my spirit were almost clean again. . . . Will you come and see me sometimes, Eric?"

"If you'll go to bed *instantly*, after leaving a note on the mat to say that you're not to be called till you ring."

There was a touch of frost in the air, as Eric walked home; yet he went slowly, because he wanted to think. Jack was his best friend, and Barbara had behaved. . . . He could not abuse the girl even in thought, after trying to comfort her and saying that she started with a clean slate. But if any other girl had behaved like that . . . any girl who meant nothing to him. Even with Barbara he ought not to be so suavely forgiving at Jack's expense. . . . It was impossible to reconcile loyalty to both of them.

Before going to bed he wrote her a note, inviting her to lunch with him next day at Claridge's before she went back to Crawleigh Abbey; and, as soon as she was sure of his mood, Barbara released her invitations; the quietest possible party with Amy Loring (who was so anxious to meet him because he had known Jim), two days afterwards a dinner for two in Berkeley Square, followed by Mrs. O'Rane's house-warming, later still a decorous and rather dull dinner with Colonel Grayle.

"You might dine with *me* for a change," Eric suggested, as he drove her home at the end of the week. "I'll get my sister to come and keep you in countenance—she's never seen my flat—and I'll think of another man."

"I'd sooner dine with you alone, Eric," pleaded Barbara.

"On first principles I discourage young girls from visiting bachelors in their rooms. I was born in the 'eighties, and I don't seem to have caught up."

"There *are* restaurants," Barbara suggested. "It's quite fairly respectable to dine without a chaperon—since the war."

Eric turned and looked out of the window with a frown. He had not troubled to tell her that he had lately received a shock which threatened to make further meetings impossible. During a lull in the tumult at Mrs. O'Rane's party he had heard Lady Maitland's rumbling preparations for an introduction. "Eric Lane? My dear Raymond Stornaway, you mean to say you haven't heard of him? But he's *the* coming playwright. You've not seen that thing of his——? My memory's like a *sieve*. . . . You must *go*." It was very familiar, but, as the other voices fortuitously grew hushed, he heard a new pendant. "But you know *her*? Babs. Babs Neave. Barbara Neave. Now don't pretend you don't know Lady Barbara Neave! Every one tells me that they're desperately in love with each other. Of course Crawleigh wouldn't *hear* of it, but he doesn't know

what to do. You know what the girl is! If you oppose her. . . . It's an absurd position. You must come along and meet them. And I'll arrange a little party. I think you'd be amused."

"All the restaurants are so crowded nowadays," said Eric.

"But if you telephone for a table——"

He was grown too fond of Barbara to provide people like Lady Maitland with an excuse for saying that he was compromising her; and he was not going to pave the way for an unpleasant altercation with Lord Crawleigh (when he would have nothing to say for himself).

"I'll dine with you, if you like," he suggested.

5

On the morning of the day when "The Bomb-Shell" was to be produced, Eric found his diary overflowing into a new volume. Before snapping the lock for the last time and burying the book in the little steel safe which he had had built behind one of the panels in the dining-room, he turned the pages for ten months, starting with the first night of his first play and ending with the dress rehearsal of the second. The ten months' record was so engrossing that he lay in bed, smoking and reading, instead of ringing for his secretary. One day he had been an unknown journalist; the next—in a phrase of which he could never tire—he awoke to find himself famous. Half-forgotten acquaintances who had sent him cards for dances now invited him to dinners at which he was courted and instantly handed on. At first he had written down, with more pleasure than cynicism, the complimentary phrases which had tickled his vanity; that had soon palled, and the compliments were monotonously framed; after two months he only recorded such triumphs as when old Farquaharson in-

vited him to call. *"I would give much to have written your play; I would have given anything to write it at your age."* Some day, when Barbara was in a disparaging mood, he would shew her that jealously guarded letter.

An idle whim sent his fingers searching for the Poynter dinner where he had first met her. Since that night her influence, suspected but never established, had caused *"Dined with Lady Poynter"* to be a frequent entry. Every Thursday he went to Berkeley Square, every Friday Barbara lunched with him in Ryder Street—after sweeping aside his scruples by appealing in his presence to her mother for leave to come to his flat unchaperoned. And for an appreciable part of each week Barbara devoted herself to arranging further meetings in the houses of their friends.

"Took Lady B. home late and circuitously."

Eric was mildly surprised to find how lately their tropical intimacy had begun. Two months. . . . And no one—in court or outside—would believe the truth. . . . *"Dined with B. in her boudoir, the house being in curl-papers. She unwontedly communicative, but tired and in need of rest."* The discreet phrasing gave him all the reminder that he wanted to construct again the night when she had told him about Jack Waring—she had indeed been communicative—; and any one who broke down as she had done presumably stood in need of rest. . . .

On that night she had turned herself from an adventure into a habit; in place of sentimental tilting there had been born a love without passion. . . .

He laid aside the diary as the telephone-bell rang.

"Hullo? Good-morning, Eric. Many happy returns of the day!"

"But it isn't my birthday."

"It's our new play, stupid. Are you feeling very nervous?"

"Not in the least. If it's going to be a success, it'll be

a success; if it's going to be a failure, my feeling nervous won't help things."

"M'yes. I like you better when you're less philosophical and more human. I suppose you're simply flooded with telegrams and letters of good wishes. Darling, I'm so excited! If it doesn't go well—of course, it isn't a *good* play; I've never said that, have I?"

"I sometimes wonder whether you'll ever say that of any play I write," he laughed.

"Oh, you *will* do good work some day. But I thought, after knowing me all these weeks—well, if it doesn't make the most tremendous hit, I shall walk quietly out of the theatre and throw myself into the river."

"I certainly shan't jump in after you."

"Not even for the advertisement? Would you miss me, Eric?"

"I'm almost sure to at first," he answered with a laugh. "Babs, I've got to get up now——"

"Don't you dare to ring me off, Eric! I want to know about to-night."

"Scott's at seven."

"And what dress would you like me to wear?"

He pondered over the familiar ritual.

"The one I always call the 'fairy queen,' I think."

"Well, say 'please.'"

"'Please.' I must get up now, or I shall be late at the office. Good-bye, Babs darling."

"Good-bye, sweetheart."

They dined with unnecessary haste. For all his philosophy, Eric's nervousness shewed itself in over-frequent consultation of his watch, and they entered their box before the stalls were half-full. Barbara sat forward, bowing to friends in the familiar, first-night gathering; but he preferred to stand at her side, hidden by a curtain, while she called back the names of the new arrivals. This

was a greater ordeal than the evening when his first play was produced, for he was known now, and the critics would judge him by the success and standard of the earlier play; instead of a handful of old colleagues, he was now on nodding terms with a third of the audience; it was a personal trial, and he did not want to fail under their eyes; most of all he did not want to fail before Barbara.

As the curtain went up, he sat down beside her and, after a quick glance at the stage, began to inspect the house. Her hand slipped into his, and he heard a whispered "Cheer up! It's going to be a tremendous success. I will it to be!" Then his attention went back to the house. Why the devil couldn't people take the trouble to arrive in time? Pushing their way in late, blocking the view. . . . Mrs. Shelley, of all people. He knew her well enough to speak plainly about it. . . . The house was very quiet, very cold; expectant, perhaps, but they ought to be warming now. . . . A slip—and another! It was curious that a woman like Mabel Elstree could go on rehearsing and being pulled up over the same thing again and again without ever learning—a moderately intelligent woman too—working at her own job. . . . The last week had been thrown away. . . .

But in all the rehearsals he had never noticed how this opening dragged. Manders had never criticized it (one of the few things he *hadn't* tried to cut about); and it was dragging. In a moment people would be yawning and talking to one another; the pit would become noisy with its feet; already there was a rustle; if they would only look at the stage instead of trying to learn their programmes by heart! They should have done that before! And still the house was cold. . . . God in heaven! small blame to it!

Eric sat back with tightly shut mouth, then grew suddenly rigid. There was a single quick laugh, the herald for gusty laughter rising simultaneously from a dozen dif-

ferent parts; instead of stopping, it swelled and engulfed the house. Ah, thank God! that sea of vacant, stiff faces had broken! The house was alive and warm. The players, pausing of necessity, breathed thanksgiving before returning to dialogue which had become suddenly imbued with new strength and finish.

Eric felt Barbara's lips at his ear.

"Didn't I say I'd will it for you?" she whispered.

"It might go quite well," he answered, unsuccessfully nonchalant. "Every one's in a good temper now."

"And you can let go my hand for a minute!" She winced and put one knuckle into her mouth. "I stood it as long as I could, but you've been *driving* my rings into my unhappy finger—All right, darling! kiss the place to make it well. I could *see* you weren't enjoying yourself, but you wanted me to feel it, too. So sweet of you!"

In the first interval they stayed in the box and allowed themselves to be seen; during the whole of the second an army of their friends laid siege to the door with greetings to Barbara and congratulations to Eric. He would have liked to smoke a cigarette outside with some of his old colleagues; he would have liked still better to think it all over in peace. This was going to be a greater success than the first play! And Barbara, with tears in her eyes, was saying "Come and congratulate us!"

Eric had little idea who flooded the box during that tempestuous ten minutes. Lady Maitland was there with an air of having written the play or at least of having discovered the author. And Gerald Deganway, who never missed a first night, simpering falsetto congratulations. And Colonel Waring and Agnes: he remembered them, because he was so much surprised to see them . . . and he had wanted to introduce Agnes to Babs, and there had been no opportunity. . . . And Colonel Grayle and Sonia O'Rane, who invited them to come back for supper. . . .

There was violent reaction after his early nervousness, and he found himself within an inch of giggling. When the lights were lowered and he had hurried the last visitors from the box, he sat down and buried his face in his hands. How long it was he never knew, before Barbara leaned over him, pulling gently at his arm.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Come outside," she whispered.

They walked to a flight of four steps leading through a fire-proof door to the wings.

"Where are you going to?" he asked.

"Sit down; it's quiet here. Now listen carefully: there's only about another twenty minutes, and then they'll want a speech from you. Now, I won't say a word! Just think out a few sentences; don't try to be original or clever; just thank them—the usual thing—as conventional as you can make it." Her solicitous voice trembled and broke. "My own darling, I am so happy to see you happy! I'm so proud of you! *Our* play! Oh, Eric, thank God for you and all your sweetness to me!"

He looked up with startled eyes, suddenly tired.

"You're an angel, Babs! But you always give me a guilty conscience, when you're like this. I think of the things I might have done and haven't; and I think of the things I have said and done, which I might have spared you."

"Well, go on giving me your love! Why *you* should talk as if you owed *me* anything . . ."

A moment later he was alone, with the memory of her lips still trembling on his. He lighted a cigarette and paced up and down the passage, thinking out his speech. She had left the box-door open, and, as the curtain fell, he took up his position where he could see the house applauding. Loud and continuous, gloriously continuous, came the clapping. The curtain was drawn aside, and the players

came forward, one by one. A crescendo of cheers greeted Manders, dying down until he could utter his smiling six sentences of acknowledgement. Then there was a pause. The lights were still lowered. Simultaneously in rasping barks came the call of "Author! Author!"

Barbara turned her head and blew him a kiss with the finger-tips of both hands.

"I suppose I'd better put in an appearance," he drawled, stamping on his cigarette-end. "Don't be offended if I don't look at you, Babs; you'd make me forget all I was going to say."

"Affection is the most insidious form of self-indulgence."
—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORTMAIN

"Farewell! if ever fondest prayer
For other's weal avail'd on high,
Mine will not all be lost in air,
But waft thy name beyond the sky.

My soul nor deigns nor dares complain,
Though grief and passion there rebel;
I only know we loved in vain—
I only feel—Farewell!—Farewell!"

LORD BYRON: "FAREWELL! IF EVER FONDEST PRAYER."

I

"I DON'T ask you to say it's a good play," Eric observed to Barbara, as they rumbled slowly home from the O'Ranes' supper-party, "but is it less bad than the other?"

Any natural diffidence had evaporated before the memory of the darkened theatre, the insistent calls of "Author," his effort—while waiting for the applause to die down—to distinguish faces in the stalls, the renewed clapping at his speech's end, the *levée* in their box and the triumphant supper.

"I'm too happy to be teased, Eric," she answered, nestling to his side. "It isn't the great play that you're going to write some day, when you've learned . . . and suffered; you still get your women out of rag-books and toy-shops; but it's very clever, it's a great success and it's made you happy. That's what matters. Who was the man in the box that you called 'sir'?"

"I call most men 'sir,' if they're older than I am."

"He was with a girl in a grey dress and some rather good pearls."

Eric thought for a moment and looked at her in some surprise.

"That was Colonel Waring—Jack's father. The girl was Jack's sister Agnes."

Barbara did not answer for a moment.

"I thought it was *him* at first," she whispered.

Since the night of Barbara's confession, Jack's name had never been mentioned. If he were indeed killed, her memory of him would gradually wither and die; and it was almost impossible to discuss him without taking sides and indulging in moral judgements. The Warings had exhausted every means of getting news and would soon be forced to presume his death; perhaps they had already done so, but Eric was avoiding Red Roofs since his discovery that he did not want to marry Agnes. Amid the turmoil of greetings and congratulations, he had found time to feel embarrassed by her presence in the box; until Barbara took the light and colour out of all other women, Agnes had satisfied every demand. He was embarrassed, too, by seeing the two girls face to face, watching, measuring and unobtrusively speculating about each other, as women always did; if there were room for moral judgements, Barbara had no defence against Jack Waring's sister.

"She gave me that glass horse-shoe for luck the night my first play was produced," said Eric irrelevantly.

"And Jack gave me the counterpart," Barbara sighed. "That's why I wanted yours to replace it. Instead of which I only broke yours."

"Well, you haven't broken my luck, as you feared."

Her shoulder, pressing against his, communicated a shudder. Though three months had passed without news of

Jack, Barbara could not feel secure even when she was alone with Eric.

"Don't boast. You may yet come to curse the day when we met, you may find I've spoiled your life and broken your luck."

"Luck?" Eric laughed a little scornfully. The success of the "Bomb-Shell" ensured that, if he never wrote another line, he would at least not starve. "When are we going to meet again, Babs?"

Looking out of the window, she saw that their cab was opposite the Ritz and that she had three hundred yards more of him.

"Does it matter?" she asked. "If you're so independent of me?"

"I can live without peach-brandy, but I like it. If you'll dine with me, I'll give you some—and all the food you most like. I owe the O'Ranes a dinner——"

"Oh, we won't have any one else!" she interrupted. Her use of the plural lost none of its charm by familiarity. "I'll come on Friday, if you like."

"On Friday old Ettrick is giving a dinner in my honour at the club. What about Monday? But I shan't let you come alone; as a matter of fact, I've invited the O'Ranes for that night."

"You don't like being alone with me?"

"I'm thinking solely of what would be said."

Barbara pouted and sat silent until she could launch an ultimatum as the cab stopped at her door. The success of his first night was making Eric masterful; and she wanted to test her power.

"If I can't dine with you in the way I like . . ." she began fretfully. "You only want to shew me off to the O'Ranes. . . ."

Eric forgave the petulance because he could see that she was tired. But he was tired too. . . .

"If you don't care about the O'Ranes, I'll see if I can get some one else some other time," he said. "It wouldn't do for you to *dine* with me alone."

"I believe you're in love with Sonia," she rejoined ill-humouredly.

"What nonsense! . . . Good-night, Babs. Thanks so much for coming."

On reaching home, he wrote to invite Mrs. Shelley for Monday. If Barbara rang him up in the morning, her repentance would be too late; he had only four arm-chairs in the dining-room.

There was no call from Barbara in the morning, neither note nor meeting throughout the day and no call at night. Such a thing had never happened before; there might be some occult cause of offence; his experience of Barbara taught Eric that she would cease to sulk when she wanted him; it was his experience of all women that none repaid a man the trouble of trying to understand her moods. Thursday was like Wednesday (and he knew that she was not returning to Crawleigh until Saturday); Friday was like Thursday—until the evening, when he nervously entered the Thespian Club as guest of honour. The hall-porter projected himself through the window of his box and handed Eric a note.

"*All success, dear Eric,*" he read. "*I wish I could be there to hear you. I shall ring you up to-night, and you must tell me all about it. Imagine I'm sitting by you, darling, and don't let the speech disappoint me. B.*"

He thrust the note into his pocket, as Lord Ettrick came forward to greet him. Congratulations and badinage broke out on all sides; he shook hands until his arm ached and he gave up trying to count the numbers; it was enough that he could recognize one face out of three. . . .

"You seem to have mobilized half the club," Eric com-

mented, looking with gratification at the growing half-circle by the fire.

"You're between Gaisford and me," said Ettrick, detaching him for a cocktail and cigarette at the far end of the room. "I'm proposing your health, you'll have to reply; and that'll be all the speeches, unless we sit late. Manders has promised to come as soon as he can get away from the theatre, and that may start the ball again. By the way, is it official yet? I haven't seen any announcement."

"Is *what* official?"

"I heard that you were engaged."

Eric's composure poured out of him, and he felt his mouth growing loose.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked with an effort.

"Oh, scores of people have told me. I came to your box rather late the other night, but I was told that the lady in question had been inviting every one to congratulate you both."

For a moment Eric frowned in perplexity; then his face lightened.

"That was on account of the play," he explained. "She came to one or two of the rehearsals, and, on the strength of that, it was always 'our play.' . . . I say, have you really heard that from many people? She's a very great friend of mine, and I shouldn't like to feel that our names were being coupled."

Lord Ettrick wrinkled his forehead in surprise and shook his head with a grim smile.

"Then, my young friend, if that's your ambition, you're not going the right way about it. I'm too busy by day to go out much at night, but any time during the last month or two . . . You know how people talk; and you're both of you pretty well known." Eric's look of mortification roused him to a more conciliatory tone. "It's done now, and, if it doesn't blow over, you'll only have yourself to

thank. I wouldn't have mentioned the subject, if I thought it was going to spoil your dinner. But I very nearly congratulated you publicly. . . . Let's see if we're all here."

They returned to the fire, and Ettrick called the roll. Throughout dinner, when Eric ought to have been thinking over his speech, he sat dazed by the warning and his own blindness. Six weeks before, Lady Maitland was proclaiming that he and Barbara were in love with each other; now a dry stick of a law lord, retiring and uninterested in gossip, heard of their engagement from a dozen different mouths and was an inch removed from congratulating him before half the club. Eric might assume that other eyes had observed him calling for her, shopping with her; it was accepted that, when they dined in the same house, he should always take her home; it was almost accepted that one could not be invited to dine without the other. . . .

It hardly lay in his mouth to tell Barbara that she must not compromise herself.

A waiter entered with a telegram for Lord Ettrick, which he read and handed to Eric.

"Regret confined bed severe chill all success to dinner and congratulations and best wishes to our distinguished young friend."

It was signed by the one absentee, whose chair still stood empty on the opposite side. Eric suddenly remembered Barbara's note: *"Imagine I'm sitting by you, darling."* As he read it, he wished that he could have brought her there; in the morning-room he had wished—no, he had thought how proud he would have been to tell Lord Ettrick that the story was true. If he could see her now in the empty chair, a rose behind one ear, a silk shawl brodered with grey birds in flight, as on the evening when they first met . . .

But she would hardly come dressed as Carmen. And,

however she arrayed herself, the Thespian Club would not admit her. . . .

"Well, have you thought out your speech?" asked Lord Ettrick.

"I've been thinking about what you said before dinner," Eric answered.

"Don't take it too seriously. You know how people talk."

"Yes, but I don't want them to talk like that about *her*! She's the best friend I've got."

He hesitated in surprise at his own vehemence.

"Have you observed one thing?" Lord Ettrick enquired after a pause. "Neither of us has mentioned the lady's name."

"Well——"

"Exactly. Well, if it wasn't necessary for me, who after all don't go about very much—But you needn't take it to heart."

"Oh, I'm not," said Eric carelessly. "And, as you said, I shall only have myself to blame if the story's not scotched here and now."

"I'll propose the King's health now," said Lord Ettrick, "and then we can have something to smoke."

2

By the simple standard of applause, Eric achieved a success. Abandoning his prepared speech, he followed Lord Ettrick's lead, picked up his cues and surrendered himself to the moment. It was something of a triumph to amuse others when he was so little amused himself.

"Not nearly long enough," said Dr. Gaisford, as Eric looked furtively at the watch on his wrist. He was wondering how soon he could go home and telephone to Barbara.

"Shall we go upstairs or sit here?" asked Lord Ettrick. "Manders ought to be with us in another half-hour."

Eric remembered with consternation that he would be expected to stay at least until midnight. There was no escaping it. Five and thirty men, his friends and entertainers, were preparing for a long, happy session; their chairs were turned at comfortable angles, they had shuffled and sorted themselves into congenial groups, each was at the earliest stage of a long cigar, and they waited on him in turn like an endless series of deputations.

"I've discussed the nightly takings of a theatre with Ettrick," he whispered, when Manders arrived at half-past eleven as vigorous and high-spirited as if he had just got out of bed; "the Dardanelles expedition with Gaisford, the plays of Synge with George Oakleigh, 'The Bomb-Shell' with Vincent Grayle, memories of Jessie Farborough with Deganway, 'The Bomb-Shell' with Grierson, Ibsen with Harry Greenbank, and 'The Bomb-Shell' with Donald Butler. I'm worn out!"

"Stay a bit longer, boy," Manders begged. "I've only just come."

When at last he escaped, there was no taxi to be had, though Eric told a waiter to keep the first that drove up. He covered half of the way to Ryder Street at a run, threw himself on his bed and asked for the familiar number in Berkeley Square.

After a long interval a sleepy voice said: "Yes? My dear, you *are* late! I've rung you up again and again. I—Eric, I was afraid you were angry with me for sulking."

"I say, Babs!" He began earnestly and had no idea how to go on. "Angry with you? Don't be so ridiculous! I got a very sweet note from you to-night. Thank you. And I think the speech went down all right. I say, Babs. . . ."

"You're out of breath, sweetheart."

"I came home in rather a hurry. Can you see me some

time? I suppose you're going to Crawleigh to-morrow— That's no good. Can you dine with me on Tuesday?"

"I wanted you to come here on Tuesday."

"You never said anything about it. Will you be alone?"

"I'm afraid not. Eric, will you be honourable? It's my half-birthday; I always have two a year. I didn't tell you, because I was afraid you'd rush out and buy me a present. And I couldn't bear to receive anything more from you. But will you come *without* a present? I've got a little party."

"I should love it. Thank you, Babs. But I want to see you alone."

She was silent for several moments.

"You're very mysterious, darling," she said at last.

"I heard something to-night that rather upset me——"

"About Jack?"

A thrill of expectation had come into her voice.

"Oh, no! It's one of those things that wouldn't matter if we weren't all congenital idiots."

"It's not something I've done?"

"My dear child, no!"

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

"I'd rather not on the telephone. I may get a moment on Tuesday; if not, can you dine with me here the next night?"

"*Alone?*" Her laugh mocked him without malice. "I insist on bringing my kitten."

He joined in the laugh.

"You may bring the kitten. I know I'm asking you to do something that I disapprove of, but I'm rather worried and I must see you alone."

For three days he explored cautiously to discover how far the Ettrick story had spread. Saturday brought him a heavy bundle of news-cuttings; but they were all concerned with "The Bomb-Shell." No one wrote to him, no

one confronted him with a blunt question, though Ettrick had protested that the story was common property. When Eric walked to Berkeley Square for the birthday party, he was embarrassed for the first time in shaking hands with Lord Crawleigh; sooner or later he would be summoned to a very unpleasant interview.

It was obvious at a glance that no one would have private conversation with Barbara that night. She stood in the drawing-room at the apex of a triangle with a compact row of parents behind and, supporting them, a longer row of silent, embarrassed brothers; cousins in every degree described a circle round the triangle, and in a wider, looser circle stood people who knew Eric and needed diplomatic handling to hide his forgetfulness of them.

"My aunt's parties are like a Derby Day crowd," panted Amy Loring, as an unseen pianist began to play and they were squeezed into the embrasure of a window. "I've not had time to see who's here yet. Babs, of course, looks divine."

"She looks well in anything," Eric answered. It was dangerous to praise her even to her own cousin lest one more voice should rise to proclaim that he was in love with her.

"You're a great friend of hers, aren't you?" Amy asked. "Some one told me at tea to-day——"

Eric became rigid, and she stopped.

"Yes?"

"My dear Mr. Lane, you don't even know what I was going to say!"

"I think I do."

"Then you aren't very complimentary to Babs."

"I feel a certain responsibility towards her."

"You mustn't mind too much what people say. . . . You know George Oakleigh? Well, in the dark ages, when I came out, he and I were very great friends; we always

have been ; I've known him all my life, and his cousin married my poor brother. . . . Need I say that *quite* a number of people . . . ? If they'd troubled to think for a moment, they might have remembered that I was a Catholic, but a little thing like that never occurs to them. . . . D'you mind my talking to you like this?" she asked with a smile that sweetened the abruptness of her tone. "When I introduced the subject, you froze up so——"

"Can't you understand?" he interrupted. "I'm very fond indeed of Barbara, but if people talk like this . . ."

"Don't mind what people say, Mr. Lane. . . . I feel we—all the family—owe you such an enormous debt. No one knows what was the matter with Babs, but my aunt was really afraid we might lose her. Of course, she'd led rather a wild and wearing life since she was a child ; suddenly she collapsed. I do feel that you've saved her life, you know ; she's the old, vital, irresistible Babs once more—except that you've taught her to take care of herself."

"The position is a little awkward. If people talk, if Lord Crawleigh——"

"I think he quite likes you," Amy interrupted.

Eric bowed and pretended for a moment to listen to the music. It was common knowledge that Barbara's fortune was forfeit on the day when she married any one but a Catholic ; if he had ever contemplated marrying her, the fees from the "Divorce" and "The Bomb-Shell" would not keep them for six months. He wondered whether Amy Loring's embassy had been inspired.

"I always feel that Lord Crawleigh condemned the world and then allowed it to continue existing on day-to-day reprieves," he said.

"That's rather my uncle's manner. He hasn't insulted you yet? He *will*."

"He's only seen me once by daylight. I fancy he thinks I'm one of the footmen. If I came to him in any

other capacity . . . The industrious ink-slinger, you know——”

Amy tossed her head impatiently.

“I don’t know whether you’re a genius or not, because I’m not clever about books and things. But you’ve made an enormous name for yourself, you’ve a big career before you; and, so long as a man’s a gentleman—by which I *don’t* mean what most people do,—I wouldn’t let anything stand in the way—except religion, of course. And I’m afraid that doesn’t count very much with Babs.” She lapsed into silence, as though she had already said too much. “And I know I’m right,” she added at length.

“I daresay you are. . . . You see, I’ve never regarded Barbara as anything but a wonderful friend. We casually dropped into an extraordinary intimacy——”

“It’s been too easy, too casual!” she cried. “You’ve taken it as a matter of course. Neither of you appreciate what you are to the other—I’m simply speaking from my impression; Babs hasn’t said anything, naturally, and I’ve hardly had two words with you until to-night——; if it had been less easy——”

“If your uncle had forbidden me the house?” he suggested.

“If either of you were in danger of losing the other . . . I wonder what you think of me, talking like this?”

“I’m grateful.”

The music came to an end, and Gerald Deganway gave imitations of the various ministers whom he had served as private secretary. Eric looked across the room and identified Barbara leaning against the piano. She was better, happier; and he had grown to be very fond of her. So long as they met daily without marrying, he shirked deciding whether he wanted to marry her. It would be pleasant to drift; but, when the cloud of gossip and speculation penetrated into the heart of the Crawleighs’ own

home, a man of honour could not shirk the decision any longer. He could ask Barbara to marry him; or her father could inspire a paragraph in the press, admitting the rumour in order to contradict it. Failing that, he would have to say good-bye to her, though she had become so much a habit as almost to be part of his life. . . .

The imitations were succeeded by more music, and Eric threaded his way to the piano where Carstairs and Oakleigh were begging Barbara to sing.

"Honestly, I've no voice to-night," he heard her say.

As he drew near, she seemed to feel his presence and turned with a quick smile.

"Can't you manage one?" he asked.

"Well, perhaps one, if you want me to. What shall it be?"

"That thing out of '*Butterfly*,'" Eric suggested.

"I'll sing it, if you like."

As Eric sought a chair, Oakleigh looked at him, stroked his chin, sighed gently and withdrew to the bridge-room as though he could not face seeing them together.

3

"I want you to take this seriously," said Eric, when Barbara arrived for dinner. "Don't try to laugh it off by saying I'm conventional; I *know* I am. The fact is, people are beginning to talk about us. I want to discuss what's to be done."

His earnestness kept Barbara from smiling, and, as he was worried and ill at ease, she beckoned him to a place by her side on the sofa.

"Do you find it so intolerable to have your name joined with mine?" she asked a little wearily.

He looked at her in perplexity. Instead of being embarrassed herself or feeling gratitude that he was em-

barrassed for her reputation, she spoke as though the gossipers had conferred a favour upon him.

"If the thing were true, it would be another matter altogether. Subject to your parents' approval, I think the best thing would be to get a paragraph into the papers, saying that there's no foundation for the rumour."

"But the rumour hasn't got into the papers yet," she objected.

"I'm meeting it on every hand."

"But, if I don't mind, why should you?" she asked.

"Well, I *do* mind. I don't like you to be 'talked about.' And I don't care to have people saying that I'm getting you 'talked about,'" he added with heat. "You must try to look at this from a man's point of view. If you were my sister, and some man who had no intention of marrying you, some man whom you had no intention of marrying——"

"You've never asked me," she interrupted.

Eric was shocked into silence. When he was fighting for her reputation, she was once more the coquette as he remembered her at their first meeting.

"I've thought this over, Babs, from every point of view," he went on, with an effort keeping his temper under her look of slightly bored amusement. "There are three ways out of the difficulty; the first is what certain people think the most obvious—that we should make the story true; the second is that we should contradict it publicly—it's the easiest thing in the world to do—and the third is that we should give up seeing each other."

He stood up with the pretence of warming his hands and fidgeted restlessly by the fire. Barbara had lost her expression of amusement and was honestly puzzled that he should make so great a pother about a piece of idle gossip.

They remained without speaking until a maid entered to announce dinner.

"I'm sorry you've been worried," she said gently. "For once it really wasn't my fault. . . . I suppose I'm hardened to this sort of thing. Why don't you just not worry? And give me dinner, because I'm very hungry."

"I can't leave it like that," said Eric, as he accompanied her to the dining-room. "A plain statement in the press——"

"It would simply draw attention to it."

"Well, that's one of the solutions ruled out."

"And I'm left with the choice of marrying you—you haven't asked me *yet!*—or saying good-bye? There is another alternative, Eric: and that is to shew you're too sensible to mind what silly people say about you."

Eric shook his head obstinately.

"No good, I'm afraid."

"Well, try to think of something else," she sighed. "Don't spoil our evening, sweetheart."

The intermittent presence of the maid, rather than any state of mental satisfaction in Eric, kept the conversation peaceful. He almost forgot the annoyances of the last week in watching Barbara's delighted enjoyment of a new experience so trivial as dining with him for the first time in his own flat. Nothing escaped her curious notice—a wine that he gave her to try with the scallops, the Lashmar chrysanthemums in a flat, blue-glass bowl, the unaging pleasure of an invisibly lighted room, Australian passion-fruit at dessert, a new artist's proof. . . .

"You're really like a child at a pantomime, Babs," he laughed, when they were alone.

She rose slowly and bent over him, touching his forehead with her lips and then kneeling beside his chair.

"I'm interested in everything!" she cried. "I love new experiences! At least, I *did*. I loved meeting new people, hearing new things—the world was so wonderful. And then—I never understood why I went on living. . . . You

made life wonderful for me again. The first night we met, when I came here. . . . You were quite right, Eric, I was a fool. . . . But somehow I wasn't afraid. I knew you'd put your hand in the fire for me."

He stroked her head and gave a sudden shiver. No one would ever know what path he might have chosen that night out of the maze of his disordered emotions.

"In those days you were nothing to me," he murmured.

"But you put all women on pedestals. . . . Eric, will you believe me if I say that I've tried to live up to your conception of me?"

"But do you know what my conception of you is?"

"Something a thousand miles higher than I can ever climb! When I'm restless, lonely, I think of our love, your wonderful devotion—like a mother's to her child . . . and my love for you. Give me your cigarette, Eric."

Before he could see what she was doing, the glowing end had been pressed against her hand until it blackened and died. He saw her eyes shut and her lip whitening as she bit it. Her body swayed and fell forward before the crumpled cigarette dropped on to the carpet.

"You little—Babs, what's the matter with you?"

She opened her eyes, breathing quickly and holding out her hand to shew a vermilion ring with a leprous-white centre.

"I'd put my hand in the fire for *you*!" she panted.

"You little fool!" He was filled with a desire to hurt her for having hurt herself. "Look here, Barbara. . . ."

But she had risen to her feet and was pressing the wounded hand to her lips.

"You don't *know* how it hurt!" she cried with a tremble in her voice.

"What good, precisely, d'you think you've done?" he asked.

She snatched a spill from the mantel-piece and thrust it between the bars of the fire.

"If you want it again——!"

Eric dragged her upright with one arm and rang the bell.

"We'll have coffee in the smoking-room," he said. "Barbara, what's the matter with you?"

She laughed almost hysterically.

"I feel I'm fighting for my life! That was to shew you I'd do anything in the world you asked me to! And you talk about our giving up meeting . . . like giving up smoking!"

Eric drew a chair to the fire and lighted her cigarette in silence. Only a fool would break that silence for twenty-four hours. . . .

"A bit rash that, isn't it?" he asked, as he cut his cigar.

"You won't ask me anything that I don't want you to," she answered. "And you know there are some things I *can't* give you."

Coffee was brought in, and he offered her sugar, knowing well—if he had been able to collect himself—that she never took it. Her cigarette went out and required another match. A pile of five books, still in their wrappers, absorbed her.

It was only half-past ten when she forced a yawn and asked him to get her a taxi. He collected a coat and hat from the hall and arranged his muffler elaborately with his back to her.

"Returning to the other thing," he began slowly. "We've not exactly disposed of it, have we?"

"I thought we were going to leave it alone," she answered timidly.

"That's out of the question." He banged open his opera hat and squeezed it shut again. "Why won't you have a simple contradiction in the press?" he pleaded.

"I don't want it. Isn't that enough?"

"Certainly. But . . . I don't want to say good-bye, if I can help it."

Barbara looked at him slowly and carefully; she was utterly at fault.

"It's for you to decide," she said.

"There doesn't seem to be any alternative."

She stood up and wrapped a lace scarf round her throat. As he helped her into her cloak, she looked reflectively round the room. Save that the windows were closed to shut out the December fog, save that there were chrysanthemums in place of roses, nothing had changed since the night when she forced her way in and sipped soda-water from a heavy goblet and broke the glass horseshoe and laughed and talked and suddenly cried. . . .

As he watched, her bones seemed to bend like soft wax, and she sank on to the sofa, burying her face in her arms and sobbing convulsively. Eric stood motionless by the fire, because he could not trust himself to move. Her shoulders, which he had always admired for their line and wonderful whiteness, rose in quick jerks and subsided with a quiver; she shook with the abandonment of a bird in its death-spasm.

"Barbara!"

"Oh, can't I even cry?" she moaned.

"Darling, you break my heart when you go on like this!" He found himself kneeling on the floor with his arm round her shoulder and drawing her head back until he could kiss her wet cheek. "If you'll shew me *any* other way out of it——"

"Why can't you let it go on?" she wailed.

"I can't; I suppose I love you too much."

"Too much to give me the one thing—Eric, you're not going to turn me away?"

"I'm not going to take risks with your reputation."

"But it would be just the same! If you *put* your denial

into the paper, people would still go on talking as long as we went on meeting! Does it matter? Do you mind it so much, Eric? Oh, my dear, I can't afford to lose you!"

She fell away from him, and he walked back to the fire. This, then, was the moment that came to every man once—the moment that he forced into the lives of his puppets once a play.

"Barbara!"

She was still shaken with sobs.

"Barbara, are you listening? You said you'd put your hand in the fire for me. Well, did you mean that?"

He snapped the question at her, and she was galvanized to drag herself upright on the sofa.

"Yes, I said that."

"You'll do anything I ask?"

"Yes." From the slow-drawn answer he knew that more was coming. "I've told you everything. I don't belong to myself. . . . There's one thing that—that I don't think you're going to ask me."

"Why not?"

"Because you know I trust you. I always have. I always shall. Oh, God forgive me for the way I've treated you! But it's your fault. Whatever I did, I should know that I could always trust you and that in time you'd understand!" A single sob escaped her, and she steadied herself like a man stopping short at the edge of a precipice. "You've quite made up your mind? . . . I must go now. Will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Won't *you* trust *me*? I don't want you to see me home, that's all. It'll remind me of too much. Good-bye, Eric. I used to think I didn't believe in God, but somebody's got to reward you, and I can't. Kiss me—quickly, or I shall start crying again. Good-bye, Eric! Oh, oh—my God!"

She stumbled to the door and twisted blindly at the

handle. It was open before he could help her. A grey wedge of fog thrust itself past her as she hurried out of the hall.

"You're not going home alone!" he cried.

Half-way down the first flight of stairs she turned with arms outstretched like a figure nailed to a cross.

"My darling; it's the last thing I shall ever ask you!"

4

Eric slept little that night. From eleven till two he walked up and down his smoking-room, occasionally throwing himself into a chair for very exhaustion, only to jump up restlessly and resume his aimless pacing. The fingers of his right hand were yellow from the cigarettes that he was always lighting and throwing away; the rest of him became stiff and chilled as the fire died down. "*As if I'd murdered her. . .*" The phrase, self-coined, repeated itself in his brain even when he was not thinking of the shaken, nerveless body which he had tried to revive.

His eyes turned again and again to the telephone. It would take Barbara ten minutes to walk home, perhaps twenty in the fog; (he was frightened by the thought of her being alone). By then she might have found something to suggest. . . . The telephone could not be more silent if she were in very truth dead. He sat down at his writing-table and addressed an envelope to her, but he had nothing to put inside it.

"*As if I'd murdered her.*" It made it no easier that Barbara had begged him not to cast her off; wives sometimes begged men to run away with them. Until she drove the burning cigarette-end into her hand, crying out that she was fighting for her life, he had not understood her passionate need of him; yet, when her need was most passionate, there

was something in her life to which she would subordinate him. . . . The proposal had been checked on his lips.

The telephone was poignantly silent. She would never ring him up again to tell him her plans for the day, never ramble again through shops and exhibitions, never again ring him up to bid him good-night. The Thursday dinner, the Friday luncheon, their notes at the week-end, the sweet pride of possession, her glorious companionship in his cloistered life were over. For no one else had he ever taken trouble; now he was thrown back on an insufficient self. To-morrow or the next day she might have a headache; never again would she give him a tired smile and say, "Won't you charm the pain away?"

"*As if I'd murdered her.*" Eric crossed the hall to his bedroom. The front door was still open, and on the mat lay Barbara's scarf. He was glad of an excuse to postpone undressing and spent five minutes lovingly packing it in tissue paper for his secretary to carry round. It would be savagery not to write a note. . . .

"Dearest, you left this behind. I hope you didn't take cold without it. It seems ironical for me to say I'll do anything I can for you. But it's true. Eric."

He rose after four hours' sleepless tossing and distracted himself by drawing cheques until the post was delivered. There were many letters, but none from Barbara. He read the *Times*, dictated to his secretary, handed her the parcel for Berkeley Square and climbed uneasily out of bed. Though he dawdled over his dressing, there was no telephone call to reward him; and, as the Crawleighs were spending Christmas in London, he would not meet her in the train.

Half-way to Winchester he grew drowsy and fancied himself in his dreams once more kneeling on the floor be-

side the sofa, with his arms round Barbara's shoulders. "*As if I'd murdered her.*" His lips were moving, as he awoke, and he wondered whether the haunting refrain had escaped him.

His sister was waiting for him at Winchester, and he greeted her with a confused affection that struggled to compensate for the pain which he had brought to Barbara.

"We were afraid you might be too much in request to come down here," said Sybil. "Eric, I've been invited to go to a dance in London next week; I suppose you wouldn't like to chaperon me? Mother does so hate leaving the country even for one night."

"Will it be very late? I can't do any work next day, if I don't get a little sleep. As a matter of fact, haven't chaperons ceased to exist?"

"I don't know. I was invited by a man I met at the Warings. He's quite a nice creature, but I can't dine and go even to a charity ball and dance with him all night absolutely on my own. Mother wouldn't let me, even if I wanted to."

Eric shrank from the prospect of sleepless hours in an overheated room.

"It's surprising what things *are* done nowadays," he said without committing himself.

"Surprising, yes. But we're rather behind the times in Lashmar. *You* wouldn't like me to go alone, would you?"

"Certainly not!" If people began gossiping about Sybil and her nameless admirer as they gossiped about Barbara and himself, he would very soon drop the young man a plain hint. And he could never make Barbara see that she wanted him to behave as he would allow no one to behave to his own sister. . . . "I'll come if I'm not already booked up."

As he entered the Mill-House, Eric tried to lose himself in the atmosphere of a place where he had spent Christmas

for a quarter of a century. His last night in London haunted him, and it was only by trying to console his mother for the absence of her two younger boys that he could avoid thinking of Barbara. There was a busy exchange of presents after dinner, and next day he accompanied his parents to church, as he had done for five and twenty years, finding peace and a welcome in the worm-eaten pew, the cob-webbed window, the top-heavy decorations and the familiar musty books. The state prayers were invoked therein on behalf of "Victoria, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, the Princess of Wales and all the Royal Family." And there was an old hymnal with a loose binding; for years Eric had slipped one of the Waverley Novels into its cover to read during the sermon. . . . To-day he listened no more to the sermon than in other years; he wondered what Barbara was doing. . . .

After the carols they lingered in the churchyard to greet their friends. If only she would make up her mind that Jack was dead, there would be no need for this anguished parting; then, though he had never contemplated it until a week before, he could ask Barbara to marry him. As yet, though he wanted her, he had still to find whether he could be content without her; before marrying, she must subordinate obligation, memory and conscience to her need of him. . . . The Warings were waiting at the lych-gate, and he asked Agnes whether she had any news of Jack.

"I'll let you know when we have," she answered, shaking her head. "It's nearly six months now. . . . I'm just keeping my mind a blank."

They turned out of the churchyard and walked in silence towards Lashmar village. For ten years they had always hurried ahead of their parents for a moment together; and, before anything else, Agnes always thanked him for her present. This year Eric had given her nothing; it was unfair to pretend that there was no change of feeling. . . .

"I suppose you're as busy as ever?" she asked abruptly. "The new play seems to be a great success."

"I think it's doing quite well," he assented. "I wish I'd seen more of you that night, Agnes."

"There was such a crowd of people; we only put our heads into the box to congratulate you. Eric, I'd never seen your friend Lady Barbara at close quarters before; she's—bewitching."

Without daring to look at her face, Eric tried to discover from Agnes' tone whether she had chosen or blundered on such a word.

"She varies," he said judicially. "That night—yes, she was looking her best then. Sometimes . . . she's not very strong, you know. . . ."

He broke off, thinking of their last night together. They walked as far as Lashmar Common without speaking, though he knew that his silence betrayed him.

At luncheon Sir Francis proposed the health of his absent sons, and the afternoon passed in lazy talk round the library fire. The smell of the pine logs filled Eric with old memories; he slipped on to a foot-stool and sat with his head resting against his mother's knees, drowsy and a little wistful. He wished that he could go back to a time when life was less complicated and he could still confide in her.

"Tired, old boy?" asked Lady Lane, as she stroked his head.

"No. Only thinking. I can just remember our first Christmas here; there was a party and a Christmas tree, and I retired to the terrace and had a stand-up fight with some young friend, and our nurses came and separated us. A long time ago, mother! Before Sybil was born."

The girl roused at sound of her name.

"You're getting frightfully old, Ricky. It's time you married and settled down."

"I've settled down without marrying. You can't do both, you know."

The drawl in his voice unconsciously irritated the girl.

"Marrying and shaking up is more in your line," she retorted. "You're too successful, too rich, too selfish, Ricky."

"My dear, I lead my life, and you lead yours. Why should either try to disturb the other?"

"Because you lead such a rotten life. Honestly, Ricky, don't you get sick of gadding about night and day with people who only condescend to know you because you're a fashion?"

He smiled lazily at the uncompromising vigour of her criticism.

"To begin with, I don't do it night and day——"

"Ricky, you simply live in your Lady Barbara's pocket. Lots of people have told me. If I were you, I wouldn't let her make a fool of me. After all, you *are* somebody. Is she going to marry you?"

"I haven't asked her. She's a great friend of mine——"

"H'm. Everybody asks me when you're going to be married. Honestly, they do, Ricky. Three people this week. That's why I say she's making a fool of you. I don't think you know how people are talking."

"Perhaps I do, but I didn't know it had spread as far as here," he sighed.

"Well, you oughtn't to do it; and she oughtn't either," Sybil declared.

Eric gazed long into the fire without answering. How on earth had they come to discuss Babs? He had been dreaming with wistful contentment of simpler, less embarrassed times when at this hour a red-faced nurse would enter and carry him, sleepily protesting, to bed. Sybil had somehow forced the conversation, they had argued—and his father and mother had listened without taking part, thereby ranging themselves on Sybil's side or at least admitting that she

was telling them nothing new. . . . Sybil was a tigress for loyalty! Ever since she had decided that he was to marry Agnes, she would have mauled and clawed any other woman who got in the way. And when that woman trifled with the devotion of a Lane and made a fool of one of the sacred family . . . No sister ever imagined that a man could take care of himself. After all, who had suffered by his tragic intimacy with Barbara?

"As if I'd murdered her." What was Babs doing now?

He looked at his watch and pulled himself, stretching and yawning, to his feet.

"I shall go to sleep if I stay here," he said. "Is any one going to dress?"

Twenty minutes later, when he came out of his bath, Lady Lane was sitting in his bedroom.

"I didn't shew you Geoff's last letter," she said. "You'll see he says something about 'The Bomb-Shell'; one of his friends has been to see it and liked it very much."

Eric propped the letter against his looking-glass, as he began to dress.

"I say, have people down here really been marrying me off?" he asked.

Lady Lane's face, reflected in the mirror, was passive and incurious.

"There was some report in one of the papers, I believe," she explained. "I didn't see it myself."

He volunteered nothing, and his mother looked indifferently round the room, now exploring with her foot a shabby place in the carpet, now rising to hook a sagging length of curtain to its ring. She had come into his room to receive confidences and to help him; his moodiness did not invite congratulations and was troubling her.

"I wonder if I shall *ever* remember to bring some more shirts down here," he mused. "I've three, four, five that I'll give you for your bandage-class."

"I'll take them gratefully," she answered. There was a pause in which he pushed a drawer home, selected a handkerchief and turned off the light over his dressing-table; in another minute they would be downstairs, and the opportunity would be gone. She slipped her arm through his and walked to the door. "There's nothing worrying you, is there, Eric?"

"I'm afraid I've rather a faculty for letting things worry me," he laughed. "If one didn't always have to work against time, at high pressure——"

His mother was not deceived into thinking that work had anything to do with his mood.

"No new worries?" she suggested. "The last month or two . . . You're not looking well; that's why I asked. If you ever feel there's anything I can do . . ."

The subject was dismissed as she opened the door. She was glad that she had given him no opportunity of a denial, for Eric had always told her the truth, hitherto.

He went to bed early and fell asleep at once after the restlessness of the last two nights. When he felt his way back to wakefulness in the morning, there was a subconscious sense that something important had happened; a moment later he remembered with a pang that he and Barbara had said good-bye.

He jumped up and rang for his shaving-water, though it was not yet seven. He must find work to do, he must keep himself continuously occupied; otherwise his brain would go on grinding out that phrase "*As if I'd murdered her.*" . . .

5

Half-way through the morning a belated postman splashed with expectant Christmas cheerfulness to the Mill-House and unburdened himself of a crushed and tattered

load. Eric's share included an envelope addressed in an unknown writing and marked "Urgent," "By hand." His fingers trembled when he found a pencilled note from Barbara.

"Christmas Eve.

"My scarf has just arrived. Thank you for sending it; I'm sorry to have been so careless. And I'm afraid I DID catch cold without it. At least I'm in bed, and the doctor says he's going to keep me here. I want you, in spite of everything, to come and see me. Come this afternoon, Eric, before you go down to your people. Just for a moment. I do want to see you so badly. You won't disappoint me, will you? I'm ill, Eric, and so very lonely. Please, please come. Barbara."

He pocketed the letter and went on with the others, reading them mechanically. As her note had reached his flat after he had left, no one could blame him for disregarding her summons; for two days he had been spared the necessity of deciding whether it had to be disregarded; he had another twenty-four hours at Lashmar, no telegrams were delivered on Boxing Day, and she had in fact not telephoned. If the servants had not stamped and forwarded the letter, he would have had no knowledge of it until his return to Ryder Street the following day.

And then?

The family was still opening parcels and comparing cards and almanacks in the hall. He filled a pipe and tramped up and down his father's library, trying to decide this question without losing his head. She was ill, he had promised to help her, he wanted to help her, he was glad of any excuse that would spare him a repetition of that waking sense of loss. So far from having murdered her, he was urged to return; and he asked nothing better than to go back.

And then?

Sybil was right; they ought neither of them to permit such an intimacy, if nothing were to come of it. Sooner or later there would be unpleasantness; and, instead of the one painful parting which still haunted him, there would be two. The position was unchanged from the time when he invited her to dinner and delivered his ultimatum. He must leave the letter unanswered; if she appealed again, he must be deaf to the appeal. There was no need to pretend that he liked his choice. She might have a chill—or pneumonia; and henceforth he must depend on the newspapers and on chance-met friends to find how she was and what she was doing. The friends, too, accepting him as her guardian, would be more likely to come to him for news; he would have to say that he had not seen her for a week, a month, six months. . . . And they would wonder and gossip about the mysterious estrangement as zealously as about their “engagement”; and the kinder sort, like Lady Poynter, instead of scheming to bring them together, would arrange their parties with a tactful eye to secure that they did not meet. . . .

Eric paused to knock out his pipe and to reflect that, as he had made up his mind, there was nothing to gain by pitying himself or by growing angry with imaginary disputants. Sir Francis and Sybil came into the library to begin the day’s work; his mother rustled to and fro, giving her orders. All that he had to do was to find an unoccupied table and settle down to work. The intimacy was over. In time he might care to think about it, he might even be able to meet Barbara, but at present he had to keep his mind absorbed with other thoughts.

He had schooled himself to a semblance of stoicism when he reached his office. It was temporarily undermined by a letter, also marked “Urgent,” “By hand,” which he found awaiting him.

"Christmas Day.

"I suppose you left London before my note arrived. I sent another and one to Lashmar, but the posts are so bad nowadays that I'm writing to your office as well. I don't think you told me how long you were going to be away, but please, I beg you, come and see me just for a moment when you're back in London. I must see you again, Eric. If you're not back to-morrow, you will be next day, I'm sure. Please ring me up the moment you get this. Barbara."

So she had lain waiting for him all Christmas Day, all Boxing Day; she was waiting now, and he had no idea how to tell her that he could not come.

The telephone rang, and he was surprised to hear Amy Loring's voice instead of Barbara's.

"Is that Mr. Lane? Oh, forgive me for disturbing you at your work. I expect you've heard that poor Babs is ill. Can you get to see her? She'd like it so much."

Eric caught himself resolutely shaking his head at the telephone.

"I'm afraid it's impossible. I've been away for Christmas, and the work here——"

"But can't you manage a moment? Look in on your way home."

"I'm very sorry; it's out of the question." He paused and repeated lamely, "I'm very sorry."

Amy sighed and made a last unsuccessful attempt to move him, only succeeding in reducing him to a state of suppressed irritation which spoiled his work for the morning. He had meant to call in Ryder Street before luncheon to collect his letters, but he could not trust himself to face the appeal which he knew he would find there. It was hard enough to do the right thing without being incited on all hands *not* to do it—and in the name of affection and charity!

In the afternoon an unfamiliar voice enquired for him by telephone.

"Lady Crawleigh speaking. Mr. Lane, I want you to do something for me, if you'll be so kind. Are you engaged this evening?"

Eric could hardly believe that Barbara had gone the length of appealing to him through her mother.

"Well, I have a man dining with me," he improvised tentatively.

"Oh, can you possibly put him off? I'll tell you why. My husband and I have to dine out, and that means leaving Babs alone. I'm afraid she's not a good patient, and, if you could keep her amused, she'd be less likely to get up or do anything foolish. That's what she's threatening at present. I feel it's very unfair to ask you to change all your plans. . . ."

However unfair, she asked him with an assurance which shewed that she would not take a refusal lightly. Eric smiled grimly to himself. As if London was not full of people who would gladly spend half an hour with Barbara! As if the Crawleighs could not have cancelled their own engagement! It was transparent, but he smiled less at the artifice than at the irony of his being dragged to the house against his will and better judgement. . . .

"I'd come, if I could," he answered hesitatingly. "The trouble is that I've invited this man for eight and I shan't be able to get away from here till half-past seven at earliest. I'll do my best——"

"I'm depending on you, Mr. Lane."

Dinner, but no one to share it with him, had been ordered for a quarter past eight. He telephoned at seven to say that he might be a little late and set out for Berkeley Square. Barbara was alone when he arrived, and he entered her room in some embarrassment. He could not imagine Sybil's receiving male visitors in her bedroom, and

he was shy to find himself alone with Barbara and to see her lying in a blue silk kimono with the Persian kitten asleep on a chair by her side and two tables submerged by Madonna lilies. As he hesitated on the threshold, she smiled wistfully and at the same time with a certain triumphant confidence in her setting.

"I was—very sorry to hear you were ill, Babs," he said.

"I've waited for you so long! Won't you kiss me, Eric?"

He picked up the kitten, affecting not to have heard her.

"What is it? A chill? Your mother said—— No, I don't think she told me what it was."

Restraint faltered with every hesitating word, and Barbara pushed the kitten's cushion on to the floor.

"Sit down, darling," she begged.

"I must go in a minute," said Eric, gravely consulting his watch.

"Who have you got dining with you?" He hesitated. "Any one?"

"As a matter of fact, I've not. I lied to your mother. You see I didn't want to meet you, Babs. I didn't want to go through that other night again."

He was still standing; but, without noticing, he had drawn nearer to the bed, and she pulled him gently into the chair.

"Haven't you missed me, Eric?" she whispered.

"Damnably!" His laugh was bitter. "I don't see how it's to be avoided, though. And we only make things worse by prolonging the agony. The infernal story's spread to Lashmar now."

Barbara's lips curled assertively.

"I'm sorry you should suffer so much by association with me. . . . If you aren't expecting any one, will you dine with me, Eric?"

He tried to review his position in the moment allowed him before his answer would begin to seem hesitating.

Once in the house, it mattered little whether he stayed one hour or three; but they were fools, both of them, to contrive or assent to his being there. Firmly, if indistinctly, he felt that she was trying to slip behind the decision of their last meeting.

"I'll stay if you like," he said and watched her ring the bell for her maid. "Babs, are you well enough to talk seriously? I don't want to say good-bye, but nothing's changed. We've the choice between a public contradiction——"

"Or a public engagement? Is that what you're afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of it."

She sank lower in the bed, covering her eyes with her hand.

"You've never asked me to marry you," she said quietly, this time without a taunt.

"You expressly asked me not to."

"You always—boasted that you weren't in love with me."

A hint of triumph in her voice made him wonder in fear and disgust whether this was the way in which she had played with Jack Waring. She was sweeping him faster than he wanted to go; but, for all his misgivings, he could not stop.

"D'you think either of us knew what we meant to the other until these last three days?" he asked gently. "Everything was too easy before," he added, remembering Amy's warning.

Barbara uncovered her eyes and held her arms open to him.

"I've always loved you, Eric."

"I've been—very fond of you."

"And now you want to marry me?" she whispered, and her eyes shone with expectation.

"D'you want me to ask you to?"

For a moment she had seemed to speak with passion, but, before he could notice the transition, he found her only trying on passion's garments.

"No, I don't," she answered slowly. "I couldn't bear it. You *know* I'm not free! But do you want to give me up? You've had a good deal of me since August and now you've had three days without me. D'you *want* to marry me?"

Eric felt indistinctly that he was no longer the man who had come reluctantly to the house to do her a favour; yet he had always been able to bring her to her knees by refusing to meet or write to her; if he put her need of him to the test, with separation as an alternative, she must surrender.

"Yes, I do," he answered.

Her hand went up and covered her eyes again. While he waited for her to speak, his memory flung up, one after another, the moods of loss and loneliness that he had undergone since the telephone grew silent and no letter came from her. A warm wave of tenderness swept over him, as he imagined the glory of having her youth and wit and beauty entrusted to him.

"For God's sake, don't ask me that, Eric!" she whispered.

He looked at her in astonishment, wondering dully what she aimed to achieve. If he insisted on asking her, she would certainly consent; but he could not ask her against her will. Suddenly he realized that he knew nothing of women; some, he had been told, liked to be bullied and compelled, others were only to be won by yielding and deference.

"You don't want me to ask you that?"

"No! For God's sake, no! If anything happens, Eric—you know what I mean—if I *can*, then ask me, please ask me! But not now! I should be miserable and I should make you miserable! Eric, be generous!"

Her fingers were pressed deep into her cheeks, and he could see her bosom rising and falling.

"I oughtn't to have started this subject, Babs," he said, coming back to her side. "If it makes things easier in any way, I'll promise you solemnly never to ask you that question until you give me leave."

She opened her arms a second time. This time he leaned forward and kissed her.

"Thank you, darling!"

"And now I'm going to give you your beef-tea. What made you talk like this, Babs?"

"I wanted to know that you really loved me."

"You knew that before."

"I didn't! No, Eric, when you said good-bye that night——"

Something in his expression stopped her. He had wholly lost sight of their earlier contention, and it was coming back to him—unsettled.

"I'm afraid things are very much where they were that night," he said.

"If I don't promise to marry you, you'll leave me? I can't promise, Eric—yet."

There seemed a dim, treacherous comfort in the adverb, and he stayed with her.

"Wine and love bring a similar intoxication. You can refuse to begin drinking, you can refuse to begin falling in love; (and love at first sight of a woman is as absurd as a morbid craving for drink at first sight of a bottle). You can trust that you will be able to say in time, 'I can no more.' And then you will find that you only see the turning-point when you are past it. The world then says without pity or understanding: 'The man's drunk.'"—
From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER SIX

DAME'S SCHOOL EDUCATION

"ANN: I can neither take you nor let you go. . . . You must be a sentimental old bachelor for my sake. . . . You won't have a bad time. . . . A broken heart is a very pleasant complaint for a man in London if he has a comfortable income."

BERNARD SHAW: "MAN AND SUPERMAN."

I

"I DON'T know how lately you've seen Eric," said Lady Lane, "but I'm frightened at the way he's losing weight."

Dr. Gaisford smiled reassuringly and rang for tea.

"I've ordered him a complete rest and change for three months."

"But he won't take it! The head of his department wants him to give a course of lectures in America, but he won't leave London. If you're more in his confidence than I am——"

"Eric pays us both the compliment of thinking us too old to have eyes, ears or brains—a common delusion among boys in love. No, he's told me nothing, but he's visibly wearing himself out in adoration of a very fascinating young woman; so, as *he* won't go away, she shall. There's no present cause for alarm."

"I wish I could think that. . . . Of course, you must never tell him that I've been talking to you behind his back."

The warning was an anticlimax after Lady Lane's desperate remedy of coming to Wimpole Street and presenting all her fears and suspicions for the doctor's diagnosis. In

a life-time of anxiety and effort she was hardly more communicative or self-pitying than her son; and Gaisford divined that more than ordinary compulsion had sent her to him.

"Speaking as a friend of both parties," he said, "I don't know what the hitch is. I haven't heard that the parents are making any trouble; and, if they did, I'm afraid naughty little Barbara would just snap her fingers at them."

"You think she's in earnest?" asked Lady Lane doubtfully.

"I do indeed—knowing something of her; and for the first time in her life. . . . I hope it will all come right. In the meantime, she's been ill and her father doesn't like the way the Government's conducting the war, so they're shaking off the dust of England for the Riviera. Eric will have his rest, whether he likes it or not."

For the first fifteen months of the war Lord Crawleigh had carried out a campaign, unsparing to his readers, his hearers and himself, to wake England to a more lively realization of her perils. His position and long record of public service secured him an undisturbed hearing as he floundered through the potentialities of Mittel-Europa with the aid of a lantern and pointer; and his audience was usually rewarded for its patience when he forsook high politics and set its flesh agreeably creeping with a peroration compounded equally of German spies and pro-German ministers. The campaign thrived in the south, but slackened in the midlands and stopped short in the north. At the same time Lord Crawleigh's prescriptive right to the "leader" page of all daily papers met with a challenge from certain disrespectful sub-editors who first mislaid him among foreign telegrams and later buried him ignominiously in small type. It was when a thoughtful exegesis on "The War and Indian Home Rule," extending over two columns, had been held up for three days without acknowledgement, apology

or explanation, that Lord Crawleigh decided to teach his countrymen a sharp lesson by withdrawing to the south of France until the spring.

Any inducement to leniency was overruled when Barbara succumbed to an attack of pleurisy. As soon as she was fit to move, he ordered his villa to be made ready, set the dismantling of his London house in hand, closed Crawleigh Abbey and carried his wife and daughter to Charing Cross with a relentlessness and speed which gave their departure the appearance of an abduction. The pleurisy developed four days after Christmas, and Eric had not seen Barbara since the night of their sick-room dinner. A week after they reached the Riviera, he heard a story, traced without difficulty to Gerald Deganway, that Lord Crawleigh had spirited Barbara away from the danger of a *mésalliance*. But, in wrestling with the necessary evils of life, Eric was finding, as others had done before him, that Gerald Deganway was the irreducible minimum; it was of greater importance that for three months no one would have cause to gossip about them; and by that time even the Warings could not reasonably hope for tidings of Jack.

Her departure cleared Eric's mind of its last misgivings and convinced him that Barbara was no longer a casually pleasant companion but an urgently needed wife. In her absence, he was thrown back on the bachelor society of the Thespian Club, though with every meal that he ate there came a growing dread that he would be absorbed into it until younger generations, watching him as he pored over the day's bill of fare with his cronies or grew petulant with the servants, came to regard him as part of the club's furniture—as part of every club's furniture—wifeless, childless, friendless and uninterested, a bore who had outstayed the welcome and even the toleration of a community founded to keep his like from utter loneliness. Sometimes, as he looked at the men who would never marry, he won-

dered what would become of him if Jack Waring appeared suddenly, if Barbara fell in love with some one else, if she fell out of love as quickly as she had fallen in love. . . .

At the end of March a telegram from Folkestone announced her return and invited him to dine with her.

Eric walked up the familiar stairs, with the august butler, at whose nod or frown he had once trembled, turning at intervals to impart confidences from the advantageous height of an advance stair. ("We" had only come back the day before and were, on the whole, better for the change. He was afraid her ladyship would hardly be dressed yet. . . . If Mr. Lane did not mind waiting a moment. . . . There was the evening paper. . . .) Eric settled himself with a comfortable sense of home-coming, his eyes on Barbara's bedroom door, wondering how she would greet him. Their last dinner together demanded recognition and a subtle modification of manner.

"Darling, how are you after all this time?" Barbara was on her knees by his chair before he realized that she was in the room. "When do you start? You never said a word about it in your letters."

He stood up and pulled her gently to her feet. Invitingly she craned her head forward, offering him her lips.

"About what?"

"Your American tour. The *Vieux boulevardier* said you were going to deliver a course of lectures in America."

Common-form invitations had reached him from time to time through his agent, but, after the first, he had relegated them unread to the waste-paper basket. And his department was still urging him abroad.

"I've no intention of going yet awhile," he told her. "It was only a newspaper rumour; perhaps some day I shall make it true. You remember that there was another rumour which my mother told me had in fact got into some provincial rag? Some day that also may be true."

He lighted a cigarette and looked at her with a faint, enquiring smile.

"Eric!" she cried with reproachful warning, though he felt that she was enjoying the thin ice on to which they had glided.

As a smile dimpled its way into her cheeks, he tired of the badinage.

"Well, did you have a good time, Babs?" he asked abruptly.

"Good? M'well. . . . I travelled the whole way with all the clothes in the world wrapped round my throat and chest. When I woke up just beyond Marseilles, it was so hot that I threw off one thing after another, until I'd got down to a blouse and skirt. Next morning, there was a glorious hot sun. . . . I jumped out of bed and ran bare-foot into the verandah and stood there—don't be shocked, darling!—in my night-gown, stretching out my arms to gather all the heavenly warmth. I couldn't have coughed if you'd paid me to. It was divine, but I suddenly discovered there was one thing wanting. Can you guess what it was?"

"From your description, most things were wanting."

"Darling, if you're prosaic, I just shan't talk to you. I discovered that I wanted some one to share it with. If you *knew* the glorious feeling of standing bare-foot on hot marble! I wanted *you*, Eric! I always want you when I'm happy, because I must share my happiness with some one; and I want you when I'm unhappy, because I'm too proud to shew my unhappiness to any one who doesn't love me. I hate the second-best and I'm so glad to see you again!"

Eric considered her with his head on one side and his hands in his pockets, cautiously and without committing himself.

"Well, Babs, if you *don't* always have me at hand for all your moods and all your needs——"

"Yes?"

He turned away to knock the ash from his cigarette and to avoid a possible change of expression in her eyes.

"My dear, you'll have only yourself to blame."

"I know. Bless you, dear Eric. Somehow, I was afraid you might have changed. Thinking of you all those miles away, I felt you were too good to be true. Let's go down to dinner. You've only got me, I'm afraid. Will you be bored?"

"I don't suppose so," he answered, smiling; but, indefinitely, he was disappointed.

2

The Crawleighs spent a month in London before repairing to Hampshire for the summer.

"Make the most of me," said Barbara, when her father's decision was made known. "You may never see me again."

"I wonder whether you'd mind," Eric mused. "Don't you sometimes feel that I've served my turn?"

"That's a horrid thing to say! If anything took you out of my life . . . Say you're sorry this very *moment*!"

Eric laughingly complied, but he could not easily shake off his disappointment that Barbara had come back after three months without nerving herself to make a decision. Though Jack Waring's name was still never mentioned, he felt that she was increasingly unreasonable in honouring any superstitious obligation to his memory. A vague, resentful impatience ruffled the serenity of their meetings; and, though they plotted to lunch or dine together daily and counted the remaining hours with jealous con-

cern, Eric was shocked to find himself secretly relieved when Barbara said "Only another week."

"I've not seen very much of you," he grumbled inconsistently. "Why don't you dine with me to-morrow?"

Barbara had undergone some transformation in the last six months until she seemed hardly to need him. In the old days she was a slave to be summoned by a clap of the hands; but, since he had healed her spirit, she was a queen to be courted.

"I'll come, if you like," she said. "It means throwing over George Oakleigh. And I haven't seen him since I came back."

"I shouldn't dream of asking you to do that. I've chosen an unfortunate day. I've chosen rather a lot of unfortunate days lately," he added.

"Is that very gracious, Eric? I've said I'll come."

The desire to get his own way and the growing need of her struggled confusedly with the resolve to be patient and the politic determination to court her as a queen.

"No, you keep to your original plan," he advised her; and then, with thinly-veiled taunt, "It's funny to look back on the old days, when you were miserable if twelve hours passed without our meeting. D'you remember when you used to say how much you needed me?"

"I need you still," she answered, wondering at his new irritability.

"You got on very comfortably without me at the Cap Martin——"

"I should have been very uncomfortable if I hadn't known that you were thinking of me, waiting for me, loving me, even——"

"And you'll get on very comfortably when you're at Crawleigh Abbey," he persisted. "And to-morrow——"

"I've said I'll come to-morrow. Eric, you're not jealous of my dining with other people? You're talking as if

you were trying to pick a quarrel. You were always so sweet. . . ."

"I'm not conscious of having changed," he answered stiffly.

But he was conscious of a change in her. While he was still indifferent, she had prostrated herself before him; when he confessed his love, she gathered up his own cast robes of indifference. It was feminine nature, and her "education" of him was at least illustrating the sex-generalizations which a man ought to have learned before leaving his dame's-school.

"Don't let's quarrel, darling!" she begged. "*Whatever* you ask, I'll do! But, when I give, I want to give everything. Won't you be patient with me?"

Ever since her return to England, Eric's nerves had been strained until he found it first difficult and then impossible to work or sleep. When he met her, there was always some trifling cause of annoyance; when he stayed away, there was hunger and loneliness.

"I wonder how long you'd like me to be patient," he murmured.

"Before I marry you? Is that what you mean? Eric, I promise in the sight of God that I'll marry you as soon as I can do it with a good conscience. You don't want me to be haunted all my life. And now, when we even speak of it . . . It's my punishment."

"I'm sorry, Barbara. I've made you look quite miserable."

She bent his head forward and kissed him.

"I've never been *really* miserable since I knew that you loved me," she whispered.

Though the quarrel was composed, the taut nerves were still unrelaxed; and, after two more nights of insomnia, Eric was driven to consult his doctor. The examination, with its attendant annoyances of sounding and questioning,

weighing and measuring, was tiresomely thorough; but at the end Gaisford could only suggest change of scene and occupation.

"I'm not a good subject for rest," Eric objected.

"I'm not sending you into a home," said Gaisford. "Why not go out to California for six months? You can scribble there as well as anywhere."

"If I work at all, it ought to be this propaganda job," Eric suggested.

"Then do your propaganda job elsewhere. I want to get you out of London. Do you want me to speak frankly? You're seeing much too much of an exceedingly attractive young woman. If you're going to marry her, marry her; if not, break away. Flesh and blood can't stand your present life."

Eric left him without giving a pledge, because he felt too tired for the effort of going away from Barbara for six months. Since he had reduced his hours of work, there was no excuse for this everlasting sense of limp fatigue; granted the fatigue, there was no excuse for his not sleeping. The doctor had paid curiously little attention to the insomnia and was childishly interested in making him blow down a tube and register the cubic capacity of his lungs. There had never been a hint of phthisis in the family, but the medical profession could be trusted to recommend six months in California when a man needed only one injection of morphia to secure a night's sleep.

He had forgotten Gaisford and his advice when Barbara came to say good-bye on her last day in London.

"My dear, have you been ill?" she asked with concern. "I've been told to use my influence to get you away for a holiday. What's been the matter?"

"I don't know. And Gaisford shouldn't discuss one patient with another. He wants me to go to California for six months."

"Then you'll go? You *must* go!" Barbara's eyes were wide with distress. "I insist!"

"I'm thinking it over," he answered, a little startled. "I'm not a bit keen to leave you, Babs."

"D'you think I'm keen to lose you? Darling Eric, if you know what you mean to me . . . But you've got to get well!"

"I don't know why California should make the—waiting any easier."

"Ah, don't say *I've* made you ill! I'll say 'yes,' Eric. . . . Now. . . . But I should only be able to give you a little piece of myself, I should always be divided. . . . I don't think you really want that, and you'd be simply wretched if you found you'd spoiled my life after saving it. . . . Eric, don't hurry me? It's only April. Wait till twelve months have gone by since the—news. If there's no further news . . . Wait till—my birthday!"

Next morning, Barbara departed to Crawleigh Abbey, and for a month they did not meet. As spring budded and blossomed into summer, Eric counted the days that separated him from the fulfilment of her promise. There was no reason for him to be anxious; but his mind was filled with nervous images, and imagination suggested a thousand fantastic ways in which Barbara might be snatched from him. As her birthday drew near, he forced a meeting with Agnes Waring and once more asked if there was any news of Jack.

"Nothing yet," she answered. "A long time, isn't it?"

"Very long. . . ." He hated himself for the hypocrisy of this conventional solicitude, when he was only impatient for authentic news that his best friend was dead. "You'll let me know . . . ?"

"Of course I will, Eric," Agnes answered. "I don't know *when*——"

Her undramatic courage, reinforced by his own sense of

make-believe sympathy, restored him to sincerity. Though he had never been in love with Agnes—as Barbara had taught him to understand the term—he was still fond of her.

"I wish you came to London sometimes," he said, beating his stick against the side of his boot. "It would make a little bit of a break for you. Will you let me give you dinner and take you to a play?"

It was the first time in eight months that he had made her any sign of affection, and she looked at him curiously. Eric wondered whether she imagined that he had failed elsewhere and was drifting back to her.

"Somehow I hardly feel——" she began. "Dick Benyon—you remember we brought him over to dine with you?—wanted me to come. . . ."

"It can't do any *harm*."

"It can't do any harm, certainly. I'll talk to mother about it."

Two days later she wrote to suggest a night, and Eric felt that he had involuntarily succeeded where young Benyon had failed; a week later he was waiting for her in the lounge of the Carlton. Though she had stipulated for a seven o'clock dinner so that they should be in their places before the curtain went up, half-past seven had struck before she hurried in with breathless apologies.

"It's all right, but I'm afraid your cocktail will be tepid," he said. "I ordered it beforehand to save time. I suppose you couldn't get a taxi."

"Yes." She laid her hand on his arm for support and walked with the same breathlessness into the restaurant. "My head's in a whirl. . . . I nearly telephoned to say I couldn't come—but I didn't see what good that would do. Eric, I want you to straighten this out for me; Jack was reported missing on the 27th——"

"Of August. Last year. Yes."

"Well, father had a letter from Cranborne's the army bankers, just before I left this morning, to say that a cheque had come in—through Holland, I think—dated October the 9th. Apparently a lot of people are traced in that way, and Cranborne's wanted father to know as soon as possible. They sent the cheque and asked father to look at it very carefully and say if *he* was satisfied that it was Jack's signature; then they'd know what to do about it or something. . . ."

Eric looked at her unwaveringly and bade her finish her story. He tried to tell himself that he had always expected and discounted this.

"I brought the cheque with me and had a long talk with one of the partners. That's why I'm so late. There's no doubt about it, Eric! Mr. Cranborne—told me—as a banker—that he was prepared to honour the cheque—is that the phrase?—as being signed *by Jack—on* that day. What does it mean, Eric? I want you to explain it all."

A voluble waiter was gesticulating and seeking instructions about the wine.

"Oh, open it now!" Eric exclaimed without turning round. A moment later the champagne was creaming slowly up his glass. He drained it, coughed once and collected himself.

"Let's first hear what Cranborne said," he suggested.

"Oh, he had all sorts of theories! That Jack had lost his memory—he remembered his name all right—; that some one had found the cheque on his body after the push and altered the date—a cheque for ten pounds—; that he'd tried to escape, and those brutes had punished him by not letting us know he was a prisoner. . . . It doesn't matter, does it, Eric? He's *alive*! That's what I want you to say to me! He's *alive*!"

"He was alive on the ninth of October," he amended.

"Weeks after the push? Then he's alive now! *Isn't*

he, Eric? He *must* be! I was right in believing. . . . Eric, will you think me an awful pig, if we waste the tickets to-night? I'd so much, much sooner sit and talk to you. It's so wonderful! It's like a man rising from the dead! It's——"

"You must get some food inside you," he ordered prosaically. "Take your time. Don't try to tell me all about it in one breath."

She gulped a mouthful of fish and looked up with brimming eyes.

"Oh, Eric, if you only understood what it meant. . . ." Her expression changed to blank fear. "You do *believe* he's still alive?"

"I do." He bent down and fumbled for the wine with a needless clatter in the ice-pail. "Agnes, for your sake, for all your sakes, I'm very, very glad!"

3

The next morning Eric called on Dr. Gaisford in Wimpole Street before going to his office. His brain felt numbed, and he had to speak with artful choice of words to prevent being tripped up by a stammer. The doctor looked once at his drawn face and pink eye-lids, then pushed a chair opposite his own and tidied away his papers.

"I suppose you *have* breakfasted, by the way?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not much of a breakfast-eater," Eric answered. "You must forgive a very early call, Gaisford; it's so hard for me to get away during the day. Well, it's the old trouble; I'm sleeping abominably. I took your wretched medicine, but it didn't have any effect."

"H'm. You did *not* take my advice to go right away."

"It hasn't been practicable so far. I may go—quite soon. But I've a certain number of things to finish off

and I want to be absolutely at my best for them." He moistened his lips and repeated "I want to be absolutely at my best for them. I've been rather worried and I've lost confidence in myself."

Gaisford listened to his symptoms, asked a few questions and set about his examination. At the end he made a note in his card-index and wrote out a prescription.

"If you're not careful," he said deliberately, as he blotted it, "you'll have a bad break-down. Now, I never tell people to do things, when I know they're going to disobey me; I shan't order you to California to-day, I shan't knock you off all work. But how soon can you go?"

"Oh—a week, if I have to," Eric answered carelessly.

"Then go in a week. Your own work, your writing—can you drop that absolutely? It's far more exhausting—anything creative—than your office-work. And what's your minimum for your office? Don't do a stroke more than the minimum. As regards your general mode of life . . ."

He ordained a rigid, but familiar, rule of diet, exercise and rest; and Eric's attention began to wander. As well bid him add a cubit to his stature! He wondered how much Gaisford suspected. . . .

He became aware, in mid-reverie, that the doctor had finished speaking.

"And I'm to take this stuff?" Eric tried to read the prescription. "Strychnine—Is that right? Iron? Bromide? I can't make a guess at the other things. I say, Gaisford, will this make me sleep?"

A hint of despair in his voice was not lost on the doctor.

"I hope so. It will tone up your nervous system. But it's only for a week, mind! That's the limit of your reprieve before you go away. Don't imagine that stimulants and sedatives take the place of natural food or rest. What-

ever—odds and ends you have to clear up must be cleared up within the next week.”

Eric nodded and held out his hand. Gaisford had understood, then. . . . He wondered how long the medicine would take to “tone up” his nerves, for he had written a telegram to Barbara the night before, as soon as Agnes left him.

He walked to his office, trying to face the position more clearly than he had been able to do in the night. Why fret and worry? Barbara’s “solemn promise” had already been broken in spirit; if she kept it in form, she would be haunted by a new memory, the intrusive shadow would take on a more terrific outline. There was no proof that Jack was alive . . . but Eric believed without proof; no certainty that he would present his claim . . . but Barbara would see nothing but certainty. Two allegiances, two promises . . . and no one could tell which she would choose.

Eric was walking blindly through streets which only his feet recognized. Regency Theatre. . . . And he had been heading for Whitehall. He would never go to the Regency again without seeing her—either a head leaning against his knee at rehearsal as they sat on a platform over the orchestra, or in their box, hand in hand, as on the first night of “The Bomb-Shell,” when his nerves were jangling like the broken wires of a harp; he could never go to Mrs. Shelley’s house without hearing her singing Madame Butterfly’s song—and without some fool’s asking if he had seen anything of Lady Barbara lately. . . .

A telegram was waiting for him, when at last he reached his office: Barbara would come up that day and dine with him; she hoped that he had received no bad news. . . . Eleven o’clock; and he would not see her until eight. He was too restless to work and at one o’clock he handed his papers to a colleague and slunk into the street. His foot-

steps were turned towards the Thespian Club; but he could not pass the hall-porter without looking for a note, as on the night when he dined in his triumph with Lord Ettrick; he could not see a page-boy without expecting to find that Barbara had telephoned to him. . . .

Half-way across the Horse Guards' Parade, he encountered George Oakleigh.

"Hallo! Come and have some lunch with me, if you've nothing better to do," he said. "I haven't seen you for a long time."

"Not since we met at Barbara Neave's," answered Oakleigh. "Where is she? I've quite lost sight of her."

"They're all down at Crawleigh," said Eric. Every one *would* come to him as the leading authority on Barbara's movements. "What about the Carlton? I can usually get hold of a table."

As they entered the lounge, Eric wondered why he had chosen this of all places. Last night's ordeal should have kept him away for ever; and the band was playing a waltz which he had heard when Barbara dined with him on her return from the Cap Martin. Music, especially the seductiveness of the waltz rhythm, was bad enough at any time when one needed to keep one's nerves unstimulated. . . .

When Oakleigh returned to the Admiralty, Eric stood aimlessly in Trafalgar Square, wondering what to do. It was too late for a *matinée*; and theatres were all becoming reminiscent of Barbara. He had long meant to order a new dessert-service and was only waiting until Barbara was in London again. Perhaps, that night, they would be saying good-bye for ever; he could no longer tell himself stories of the life that he wanted her to share with him. Perhaps, when she came to choose a dessert-service, it would be with some one else; she would give to some one else all that she had given him, all that she had been unable to give him. . . .

He was home before he knew that he was even walking homewards and thankful when his housekeeper came to discuss dinner. He chose a cigar and at once put it back in the box. His hand was shaking; and, if he once began to smoke, he would never stop. Stimulants and sedatives, he must remember, were not the same as natural food and rest; therefore he had drunk nothing at luncheon, therefore he would not smoke now. There was nothing that he could do; and Barbara's train did not reach Waterloo for another hour. . . .

His sense of time became dulled: Barbara was standing in the doorway before he had even thought of dressing.

"My dear! I expected to find you in bed! How *dare* you give me such a fright? When I got your telegram this morning—oh, I'm out of breath! I ran all the way upstairs!—you'd been saying that you felt so ill! Tell me what it's all about. I had the most awful difficulty with father about getting away; he couldn't make out why I always wanted to rush up to London just when he'd got people staying down there——"

"I didn't mean to work on your emotions," said Eric, as he helped her out of her cloak.

"Sweetheart, *whatever* I was doing, you know I'd come from the ends of the earth, if you were ill. But I'm afraid father'll think me a fraud. It'll be your fault if I can't get away next week."

Eric had to think for a moment before he recalled that her birthday fell in the following week. It was the first time that she had referred even indirectly to it on her own initiative. He looked at her closely, but her face revealed only high spirits and a radiant pleasure in being with him again.

"I wanted to talk over one or two things with you," he

explained. "We shall start fairer if you don't feel you're under any obligation to me——"

She caught hold of his hand and kissed it.

"I shall always feel that, Eric."

"Well, for to-night I want you to feel quite unembarrassed. I want to talk to you about Jack Waring. He was reported missing last August."

Barbara's face grew suddenly grave; and, in a whisper, she supplied the date.

"Well, his sister dined with me last n-night——"

Eric stopped as he caught himself stammering, but Barbara laid her hand imploringly on his arm.

"Go on!" she cried. "I can stand it!"

"They don't know whether he's alive or dead." Her hands were slowly withdrawn from her cheeks, her face regained its composure, and she resettled herself, still breathing a little quickly, on the sofa. "They know nothing," he went on slowly. "But there's reason to suppose that he wasn't killed at the time when he was reported missing. There's reason to suppose that he was alive at the beginning of October."

Still standing with his shoulders leaning against the mantel-piece, Eric told her slowly and colourlessly of the belated cheque. At the end she sat watching him in silence. She too, surely, was trying to convince herself that this was what she had always expected. . . .

"That's all I know. That's all his people know," he added.

"But October. . . . June. . . . Why hasn't he written?"

"You're assuming he's alive. We don't know. He may have been badly wounded, he may have died of wounds——"

"But if he was well enough to write a cheque?"

"I don't pretend to explain it. His sister threshed it all out at the bank yesterday; she and I threshed it all out

again last night. And we're none the wiser—except that on the ninth of October he drew, dated and signed a cheque. I think that's certain. There's no doubt about the signature, and no one would trouble to forge a cheque for ten pounds. . . . I always promised to let you know as soon as I had any news, Babs."

She nodded and pressed her knuckles into her eyes.

"October to June . . . instead of August to June," she murmured at length. "And not a word of any kind. What do his people . . . ?"

"He'll now be published as 'Previously reported missing, now reported to be missing and a prisoner.' *They* don't know what to think any more than we do."

She sighed and then looked up to him with a grateful smile.

"Thank you for telling me, Eric."

He turned away and moistened his lips.

"You mustn't forget that it affects my own position," he warned her.

The smile faded from her face, and she looked at him with startled eyes.

4

It was a silent dinner, for Eric was exhausted and Barbara was thinking deeply. Nearly a year ago, when Jack was first missing, she seemed to have lived through all these emotions, to have been tossed backwards and forwards in her dreams like a plaything of the gods at sport. For twelve months she had been sick with longing to know whether he still wanted her; and, when the gods had tortured her to madness, they let her think that the cruel game was over. She dreamed again of happiness, seeing herself as a child; another child, the very symbol of love and forgiveness, came to bring her peace, and they played

together in the sun-drenched loveliness of a dream. Then the gods flung a shadow before her feet. In dream after dream her child-lover begged her to stay, but the shadow parted them and urged her forward. In time she realized that it was Jack's shadow. . . .

Never were dreams more vivid. She knew each note of her lover's voice as he begged her to stay and let him make her happy; and night after night she awoke to find herself stifling in the embrace of the shadow. Every one thought that she was dying; she herself knew that she was being driven mad; and, when the gods saw that she could bear no more, they filled the world with a blaze of light which banished dream and shadow.

"I hoped God had forgotten me," she whispered. "I've been happy too long. What am I to do, Eric?"

"You must follow your inclination."

She sighed and looked away into the shadows beyond the table.

"My inclination's always to do what you want. . . . I'm glad for both our sakes that this came when it did. I couldn't have made you happy while I was uncertain. . . ."

"And, if the war ended to-morrow and Jack came back safe and sound next week, what then?"

"It depends on him. I gave him my solemn promise, when I was trying to make reparation."

"And I don't count at all. After all our love, you could forget me——"

"I could never forget you, sweetheart."

"But—you're willing to *try*?"

"What else can I do? Oh, what a muddle I've made of our lives!"

Eric had determined to be patient and restrained; but his voice, uncontrolled and scornful, seemed to come from a distance.

"Will you make it any better by keeping faith with Jack and breaking it with me? You'll be unhappy all your life, you'll never forgive yourself, you'll never forget the wrong you've done me, if you marry any one else!"

Barbara's eyes filled with fear.

"You speak as if you were putting a curse on me!"

"I don't believe in curses or blessings or luck or your other superstitions. I'm warning you—and I'll add this. You once undertook my education, but I think I can teach you one thing, one thing about love: it has to be whole-hearted. . . ."

He flung away and stood with his arm on the mantel-piece, fumbling the lock of a cigar-cabinet with clumsy fingers. Barbara made no sound, and after some moments he stole a look at her.

"I know," she answered quietly.

"Well——" He hesitated and then took his plunge. "You've got to decide, Babs."

"You must wait till we've heard something definite."

"No! If we heard to-morrow, to-night, in five minutes' time, it would make no difference. I want the whole of your love, I want to stand first." He waited, but she said nothing. "You've very often told me how much you loved me," he went on, ironical at her silence. "You've told me how you need me, how grateful you are to me, how much you want to make me happy——"

He had dropped into unconscious parody, and its technical excellence set her writhing.

"Don't, Eric! Please!"

"You must decide, Babs."

"No!"

She buried her face in her hands and sobbed so wildly that he expected at any moment to see his maid's head at the door. For a while he was stoically unmoved; then the crying gave him a pain at the heart, and he stepped

forward, only to pull up before he threw away his victory.

"Eric, *don't*," she cried, as soon as she had mastery of her voice.

"You must decide," he repeated.

"And if I say 'no'?"

"I've said you were under no obligation to me."

"But—you'll turn me away? If I came to you to-morrow and said I'd changed my mind——"

"It would be too late."

She steadied herself and turned round, bending for her gloves and then drawing herself upright to face him.

"I . . . can't . . . now, Eric. . . . Is it still raining? If it is, I'd better have a taxi."

"I'll see if I can get you one."

He had seen this gesture before; and Barbara had followed it with a stream of notes and messages; begging him to come back. Eric walked slowly into the street, giving her generous time for consideration. A taxi stood idle at the top of St. James' Street; and, when he returned with it, she was in the hall, white-faced but collected, turning over the pages of a review.

"Good-bye, Eric," she said quietly. "I'm afraid I've only brought you unhappiness. And my love doesn't seem much use to any one. . . . Don't bother to come down with me."

He went into the smoking-room and dropped limply on to a sofa, waiting for the telephone to ring, waiting for her to confess defeat. A hideous evening—almost as bad as that night before Christmas. His cheeks were burning, and his head ached savagely. Suddenly his theatrical composure and stoicism left him; his body trembled, and he was amazed to feel tears coursing down his cheeks. This, then—he was quite detached about it—was the nervous break-down which Gaisford had prophesied. He had not

cried for twenty years . . . and now he could not stop. His heart seemed to have broken loose and to be hammering in space, like the engine of a disabled clock-work toy.

It was still absurdly early, for their scene had taken place among the nut-shells and coffee-cups of dinner. There was time for her to come back, to telephone; she knew by harrowing experience what a parting like this meant. And, while he waited, he must do something! Perhaps she would not break silence till the morning. He would see that she did not wait longer than that. . . .

"*Darling Babs,*" he began. A hot tear splashed on to the paper, and he reached for a fresh sheet. "*Darling Babs, It was your choice. I pray God that you will find greater happiness elsewhere. . . .*"

He strung sentence to sentence, not knowing what he wrote. Was it not weakness that he should be writing the first letter? But Barbara was probably writing to him at this moment, writing or asking for his number. . . . The night lift-man was bribed to post the letter, because Eric dared not leave the telephone. He sat by it trembling as though with fever, while eleven o'clock struck . . . and midnight . . . and one . . . and three . . . and five. . . .

In the morning he was called at his usual time—to sink back on to the bed almost before he had risen from it. While he waited for his secretary, he telephoned to ask a colleague to shoulder double work for the day and began to think wearily what other engagements he must break. In an interlude of their over-night discussion Barbara had asked him to lunch with her. . . .

With a strangely uncontrolled hand he wrote—"I'm afraid I can't remember what I said in my letter last night. I was feeling too much upset. Didn't you ask me to lunch with you to-day? I'm afraid I'm feeling so ill that I've had to stay in bed. . . ."

When his secretary arrived, he sent her to Berkeley Square with the note. While she was gone, his parlour-maid came in with a swaying mass of White Enchantress carnations and a pencilled note. "*May God make you happier than I've been able to do!*"

Eric tried to divert his thoughts from the note by giving elaborate instructions about the flowers and his meals for the day. Before he had done, his secretary returned, and he was still dictating when a sound in the hall froze his voice and set his heart thumping.

"I hear Mr. Lane's not well. Do you think he could see me for a moment?"

"I'll enquire, my lady."

As Barbara came into the room, Eric saw that her face was grey with suffering and that she seemed hardly able to keep her heavy lids open.

"Eric, what's the matter?" she asked, coming to his bedside.

In trying to speak softly her voice, already hoarse, disappeared altogether and she rubbed her throat wonderingly.

"What's the matter with us both?" he asked weakly. "Babs . . ." His voice broke. "You look like death!"

Before she turned her face, he could see that she was biting her lip.

"Hush, darling child! I'm only tired; I didn't sleep very well. I kept on remembering that I'd lost some one I loved better than any one in the world," she cried tremulously.

He raised himself on his pillows, stretching out hands that twitched.

"You *haven't*, Babs! If you want me——"

"Not at that price, darling. If my love for you were everything—there's something else. I don't know what it is. . . . But I've not come to upset you again. Last

night I told you that I'd come to you from the ends of the world, if you were ill. Tell me what's the matter, Eric."

She pulled a chair to the bed and gave him her hand, which he covered with kisses.

"I'm broken up! I'm sorry; you can despise me, if you like," he cried. "I can't afford to lose you, Babs: I love you too much."

The tears were standing in his eyes, and the sight steadied her. Pillowing his head on her breast, she ran her fingers through his hair, caressing and soothing him like a child.

"*I've* done this. . . . You must forgive me, Eric," she whispered. "I didn't see what I was doing; until quite lately I didn't see that you cared for me at all—not to matter, I mean—you were always sweet to me, of course. If I'd known how I was hurting you . . . Won't you wait, Eric? I must let you go now, if you insist; I'm nerved up to it. . . . But is it worth it?"

Eric thought over the change that had come upon them since Christmas.

"No. I can't afford it," he answered wearily.

She bent down and kissed his forehead. Was the kiss rather mechanical? Eric lay with his eyes shut, trying to analyze the double change. Was a nervous break-down always like this? Barbara was stroking his head gently; she had kissed him compassionately, lovingly, but he had fancied a change in her, as though she, too, realized the completeness of his subjugation.

"See if you can't sleep, Eric," she whispered, as he opened twitching lids to take stock of her.

Pity, or some kind of maternal love, then, survived his defeat. . . .

"Average man is a match for average woman, eighteen chances to eighteen, but zero always turns up in woman's favour. Man, being a philosopher and far less interested in woman (who is an incident) than woman is interested in him (who is her life), would cheerfully go on playing with the odds always slightly against him, if he had a clear idea of the value and significance of zero. But zero is woman inexplicable—something fantastically loyal or shiveringly perfidious, savagely cruel or quixotically self-sacrificing, something that is primitive, non-moral and resolved to win at all costs. In the sex-gamble, zero is more than a thirty-six to one chance; it is Poushkin's DAME DE PIQUE and turns up thirty-six times to one. And man shews his indifference or his greatness of soul by continuing to play, by rising imperturbably triumphant over zero. . . . Or perhaps he shews that he is an eternal sex-amateur. . . ."—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EDUCATION FOR THOSE OF RIPER YEARS

"Verily when an author can approve his wife she was deserving of a better fate."

LEONARD MERRICK: "WHEN LOVE FLIES OUT O' THE WINDOW."

I

"After diagnosis," said Dr. Gaisford, "the prudent physician bases treatment on self-interest. You're not fit to travel by yourself yet, Eric; when I've patched you up, I shall send you away. If you don't go, you'll never do any decent work again."

Having persuaded his patient to stay in bed for a week, the doctor looked in nightly "for five minutes" and stayed sixty-five, smoking three disreputable pipes instead of one and generalizing on life and health.

"It gives me a headache even to think of work," said Eric, his brain half-paralyzed with bromide.

Perhaps it was the bromide, perhaps it was his nervous and bodily exhaustion; the most frightening part of this latest illness was the attendant utter incapacity to make up his mind. When Barbara left him for Crawleigh Abbey, he had resigned from his department and withdrawn the resignation, accepted an invitation to lecture in America—and cancelled the acceptance; every night he led Gaisford through the same argumentative maze; complete rest, partial rest in London or the country, flight from England and all association with Barbara, full work—as soon as he could resume it—to keep him from brooding about her;

he could not decide. And from time to time a mocking refrain told him that as an undergraduate and again in the first flush of fame he had aspired to be the new young Byron, dominating London. . . .

"Poisoned rat in a hole," he whispered to himself. . . .

Gaisford would sit with his arms crossed over the back of a chair and his feet twisted round its legs, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe and frowning at his boots. In a long experience of practice among rich and self-conscious patients who would always rather be "interesting" than normal, it was not the first time that he had watched the bloom being rubbed off love; nine broken engagements and balked romances were born of doltish delay; but a mass of sensibility like Eric Lane had not the stamina to wait nor the placidity to go away and forget.

"You told me you had a novel on the stocks," said Gaisford. "I suppose you wouldn't let me see it?"

The first draft of the book was already in type, and, though Eric hated his work to be seen before he had set the last polish on it, the new indecision and weakness of will allowed him to be overpersuaded. Gaisford brought back the manuscript at the end of three days and talked of neurotic impressionism and the methods of literary jerry-builders.

"I hope you're not writing yourself out," he added.

Eric was frightened for the first time since the "Divorce" placed him beyond the reach of want. So many men seemed capable of one play or novel—and then no more.

"One can't always be at concert-pitch," he sighed.

"Then you mustn't go on to the platform till you are."

"It's easy to see you've never been a journalist! The agony, the violence to soul, when you *have* to come up to scratch, when your copy *has* to be delivered by a certain hour! Writing without time to revise or even to read what you've already written—the compositors setting up the be-

ginning of an article while you're still writing the middle. . . . And the public pays its twopence and expects us to be always at our best!"

"Well, the public pays me its two guineas and expects *me* to be always at *my* best," grunted the doctor. "If I'm off colour, I take things quietly. Otherwise I should defraud the public and ruin my practice at the same time. You must take things quietly until you're fit to work again."

After he had gone, Eric tried to make up his mind what to do. His thoughts ran uncontrolled to painters whose sight had become impaired and composers who had lost their hearing. If *he* had done violence to the indefinable blend of gift and acquisition which separated the man who could write from those who could not . . . This was a thing to be tested. The scenario of "The Singing-Bird" was ready; he had only been waiting because there was no hurry for another play. There was now every hurry to establish whether he could write a play. If Manders turned up his nose, it would be time indeed for a holiday.

For three months Eric buried himself in his flat, only emerging at the week-end. Lashmar Mill-House gave him proximity to Agnes Waring; and every week he made an excuse to walk over to Red Roofs and ask for tidings of Jack. The news that he was alive seemed better than the suspense of no news; but the tyranny of love was strange when a man could pray for the death of a friend. The Warings' atmosphere of dignified expectancy rebuked him; they made no more pother than if a single letter had gone astray. The colonel motored daily into Winchester and sat on his tribunal; Mrs. Waring presided over her bandaging classes, and Agnes looked after the house. There was no fretting at Red Roofs; the errant letter would come to hand—or it would not; the Warings were a military fam-

ily. Sharing their suspense for the first time, Eric marvelled at their composure. His own heart quickened its beat whenever he asked with false solicitude whether Agnes had tried to get news through the American or Spanish Embassy, the Prisoners-of-War Clearing-House in Copenhagen or the Vatican. Peace of mind returned a step nearer each time that she shook her head and murmured, "Yes, we tried that. It was no good, though." Then his growing security was checked by a gripe of conscience; he felt like a murderer who stole furtively into the woods by night to see whether prowling animal or pursuing man had disturbed the grave. Well, at least another week had passed. . . . But in a week's time he must undergo the suspense again. Agnes might come to him, radiant as on that night when she dined with him, crying "Eric! You remember that cheque? Well, we heard to-day. . . ."

Extravagant tension and violent relief destroyed the serenity required for good work; but Eric was not dissatisfied with the progress of his play. Ease and command had grown reassuringly; his psychology was surer, perhaps because his own psychological experience had been so much enriched; and his dialogue, losing nothing of its neatness and economy, had taken on an added verisimilitude. It was too early to judge dispassionately; but, as Eric made his last corrections and sent a copy of the script to Manders, he felt a warmer glow of confidence than either of his first plays had inspired.

It was the end of October before he had finished. The strain of work had buoyed him up, but it was succeeded by a debilitating reaction, which impelled him with guilty reluctance to Wimpole Street.

"I'm glad you don't even pretend that you've been following my advice," said the doctor with a hint of impatience, as he brought his examination to an end.

"You know, Gaisford, it's not the least use telling me to do nothing," Eric answered jauntily. "I'm not built that way."

"So I've heard before—from others as well. And the others have found themselves packed off to nursing-homes, which, my dear Eric, are very tedious institutions. Are you going abroad now?"

"Not at the moment."

"What *are* you going to do?"

"I'm going back to my office, if I'm still wanted."

Gaisford shrugged his shoulders ruefully.

"You know, Eric, it's a waste of my time and of your money for you to come to me for advice. You've definitely gone back since I saw you in the summer."

"I've been working very hard; but I'm rather pleased with the results."

"I hope it's nothing like that novel you shewed me," said the doctor gloomily.

"I'll send you the script when I get it back from Manders," Eric promised with a laugh.

2

On his return to official work, Eric found that he could not concentrate his attention on anything until he knew what Manders thought of "The Singing-Bird"; sometimes he wondered whether he could ever concentrate until Barbara had brought his suspense to an end. For three months they had not met or corresponded.

"Dr. Gaisford says I simply make you worse," she told him. "I mustn't add that to my other sins. If you want me, I'm there; but I shan't write to you, and you mustn't write to me. I shall miss you horribly, but your health's more important than my happiness. We're coming back to London in the autumn."

A week before her return, the whole Mill-House party motored over to Red Roofs to dine with the Warings. It was an old promise, and Eric was glad to avail himself of it to break the continuity of his stilted Sunday calls. As he dressed, a note was brought him from Colonel Waring, and he read with some surprise:

"I trust you are not going to fail us to-night. There is a matter on which I want your advice and, perhaps, your help."

Eric tore the note into small pieces and went on with his dressing, only frowning at his own want of control when he found his hand shaking until he could hardly part his hair. There was only one subject on which anybody at Red Roofs could want to consult him; from the fact that Colonel Waring wrote—and wrote to him—some official action was pending; otherwise Agnes would have whispered a word to him before dinner. They had received news that Jack was alive . . . or dead . . . or they had thought of a new means of getting in touch with him. . . .

Eric kept his surprise to himself and drove silently through two miles of thicket and clearing to the south end of Lashmar Wood. Beyond a cordial hand-shake and the smiling statement that he was glad to see him, Colonel Waring vouchsafed no explanation of his letter. Eric looked keenly at Agnes and her mother, but their faces and manner betrayed neither elation nor . . . What else could they betray? he wondered sinkingly. If Jack were dead, the dinner-party would have been postponed. They still hoped for him, but their hopes were not hardy enough to be exposed.

When the men were alone after dinner, Eric's heart missed a beat and he gripped the arms of his chair. The

colonel, after fidgeting with a decanter and tidying away the remains of two different conversations, carried his glass to Eric's end of the table and sat beside him, asking with a smile whether his note had been delivered in time.

"This is between ourselves," he began, leaning back with his legs stretched out and frowning at the blue flame of a grenade-shaped cigar-lighter. "We've had news of a kind about Jack." He raised his hand as Eric tried to speak. "No, my dear boy, that's just what we want to avoid! Don't congratulate us—*yet*. You see, we've been through the racket once. . . ."

"You don't know for certain, then?" Eric asked and wondered whether he was imagining a tremor in his voice.

"No. Let me see, Agnes told you all about the cheque, didn't she? He was missing in August last year, and the cheque was drawn in October. We now know that he was alive in December. It appears . . ."

Eric did not hear the next few sentences. Stoically, yet with an underlying measured jubilation, the old colonel was dragging Jack to security from the presumption of death two months at a time. Alive in October, alive in December! Thirteen months ago, eleven months ago. Some one would have heard of him in February or seen him in April! He was catching up hand over fist. And one day he would land in England, you would meet him in the street without warning; as you dawdled through Berkeley Square, you might see him standing on the door-step of Lord Crawleigh's house.

"I don't for one moment suppose that this is the only case." Colonel Waring was commenting.

Eric looked up with an intelligent nod, wondering what he had been told. Waring, always soldierly and dapper, with a neat care of person which he had handed on to his children, seemed years fresher and younger to-night; the

liverish tinge of yellow which settled on his face in cold weather had wholly departed.

"Would you mind giving me the dates again?" said Eric.

"Missing in August; the cheque in October; the row in December. This fellow Britwell" (Eric wished that he had listened to find out who was Britwell) "was taken prisoner at the same time, and they were in the same prisoners' camp. Britwell couldn't say how badly Jack was wounded, because he'd been in hospital himself until the day before the row came. Jack, according to the story, was hauled up for calling one of the guards a 'Schwein-hund.' (You know Jack well enough to say if he'd be likely to fling about abuse of that kind without provocation). His only defence was that the guard had told him—in German—to do something, and almost the only German he knew was that word, because they'd shouted it at him when they found him half-unconscious in his trench and kicked him back behind the lines, and the women and children had screamed it at him, in the intervals of spitting in his face at all the stations. And it was the one word that all the camp guards used to every British prisoner. Well, he may have been given the opportunity of apologizing or he may not; if so, he refused it, and the last thing Britwell heard was that he'd been packed off to solitary confinement in a fortress for nine months. December '15 . . . to September or October this year. That explains the cheque, but it doesn't explain why he hasn't written. . . . Of course, he hasn't had much time. . . ."

The stoicism in Waring's composed face became eclipsed for a moment. The boy might have died of his wounds or of ill-treatment; he might have offended a second time and been a second time imprisoned without power to communicate with his friends; he might have been transferred to another camp with an unrelaxing ban on all his letters

lest he tried to describe the barbarism of which he had been made a victim. . . .

"I've got that straight so far," said Eric slowly. "Now tell me what I can do."

If the worst came to the worst, he would at least try to surrender his claim on Barbara with a good grace.

"Well, it's the old business: we want news," said Waring. "I tried the War Office as soon as I heard from Britwell, which was a week ago; he's been transferred to Switzerland as one of the badly wounded cases. You know what the War Office is; I may be fed with printed forms for months. . . . Do you know anybody there who can take up the thing personally?"

"If I don't know any one, I can soon *get* to know the right man."

"We shall be very grateful. Meanwhile don't talk about it—to anybody."

Eric refrained from giving a promise, for he knew that he would have to tell Barbara the following week. Within three hours of his return to London he had set half-a-dozen telephone wires humming, and, before leaving his department, the newly-found freemasonry of the public service had supplied him with all available information. Officially, Captain Waring was "missing;" but his name had not been reported from any German source; unofficially, the War Office had a copy of Major Britwell's letter to Colonel Waring. Nothing more was known. On the other hand, a great deal of new information was pouring in since the convention for the exchange of wounded prisoners. If Captain Waring were incapacitated and if the official German conscience were not too uneasy, he might have the luck to be transferred to Switzerland at any moment.

Eric sent a report to Colonel Waring and wrote to Barbara that night for the first time in three months. "*I want you to know as soon as possible that Jack was alive last*

December. That's eleven months ago, and he may be alive still; the family simply doesn't know. I'll tell you the full story when we meet."

In thanking him, she suggested a night for dining together on her return; and Eric spent three days that were as restless and insupportable as the three hours before a first night. It would hurt intolerably if she behaved as a stranger, when they met; almost as intolerably if she threw herself into his arms—and forced him to remember what he was threatened with losing.

On the evening before they were to meet, the telephone rang, and Manders' voice, brisk and cheerful, enquired if Eric was likely to be at the Thespian Club that night.

"I wanted to talk about this play of yours," he explained. "Well, can you lunch to-morrow, say, half-past one?"

"Yes. I should like to. What do you think of it, Manders?"

There was a pause.

"It's too long to discuss now."

"You can just say whether you like it or not."

"I'll tell you all about it to-morrow. Cheerio, boy."

Eric was irritated by Manders' uncommunicativeness. The fellow could at least have said, "First rate!" or "The best thing you've done." "Too long to discuss now" meant hours of captiousness and months of heroic surgery. And with his late loss of assurance Eric could not say with confidence that it *was* the best thing he had done. . . .

3

When he reached the club next day, Eric found that Manders had arrived before him and was ordering luncheon for both.

"D'you like the '06 Ruinart, or is it too dry for you?" he asked.

"Nothing's too dry for me," Eric answered, "but I decline to drink champagne at lunch. I've work to do this afternoon."

His host smiled persuasively and continued to write his bill.

"It'll do you good, boy. Buck you up. Well, how are you? The last time I was here, some old buffer told me you'd been seedy, but that was right away back in the summer. What was the matter?"

"I was only a bit run down," Eric answered. "What did you think of the play?"

Manders gave his bill to a waiter and planted his elbows on the table, pressing his finger-tips together.

"Well, I read it very carefully," he began. "By the way, before I forget it, 'The Bomb-Shell's' doing very well on tour."

Eric chewed his lips impatiently. He would gladly hear about "The Bomb-Shell" later, but he now wanted to pin Manders to a criticism of "The Singing Bird."

"Well, let's keep the wolf from the door as long as we can."

The subject dismissed, he looked up expectantly and found Manders wholly absorbed with his oysters, rejecting red pepper for black, shaking a cautious drop of tabasco vinegar on each, adding a dash of lemon-juice and, when all else was ready, sipping his champagne with preliminary caution. The play would have to be cut about, then; perhaps the actor-manager was disappointed with his own part. . . .

"Well, let's hear all about it," Manders began heartily. "When did you find time to write it? After you'd got 'The Bomb-Shell' out of the way?"

"Not immediately. I knocked off all my other work and

concentrated on this thing day and night for three months."

"Three months? You're a quick worker. You know, boy, that would have been a better play if you'd given more time to it."

Manders slipped three oysters into his mouth in rapid succession, and Eric smiled with indulgent patience. One hard-dying school of critics always made quick work a synonym for hasty work.

"I managed to crowd about three years into the three months."

"Ah, that means you're writing with your nerves! Now, if I were you, I'd put the thing aside for six months, clear it out of your head; then, when you come to it with a fresh mind——"

"You don't like it?" Eric interrupted. "Why not?"

"I don't like it in its present form. I don't suppose you want a line-by-line criticism. . . . If you look at it in six months' time, you'll see my objection for yourself."

Eric raised his glass mechanically and was vaguely surprised to find himself drinking champagne. Then he remembered that champagne had been ordered to "buck" him "up"; he remembered, too, Manders' solicitude for his health, the enquiries when the play had been written and how long he had taken to write it, the evasion and silence the night before on the telephone and again at the beginning of luncheon, when he tried to extract a frank opinion. . . . Manders, then, was rejecting the play . . . and trying to be considerate. . . .

"We don't mince matters at rehearsal," he said with a breathless laugh. "You think the play's hopeless?"

Manders looked relieved, but he had known so many disappointments himself and seen others so often crushed by them that his brown, monkey eyes were full of pity.

"It no use at all. In its present form or any other. If it had been any one but you, I wouldn't have read two

pages of it. You may as well take the whole of your physic, boy; you've got to stop writing for the present, you've lost your sense of the theatre, you're forgetting all the tricks you ever learned. D'you know, when I read that thing, I thought for a moment that you were trying to palm off some old thing that you'd written when you were an undergrad?"

For a moment Eric lost his sense of distance; the long coffee-room was full of shouting and discordant laughter; a waiter, who seemed quite near, asked in a remote voice whether he might take the black pepper. . . . Eric gripped the edge of the table, praying that he might not disgrace himself.

"I wonder—*why*," he murmured faintly.

Manders shrugged his shoulders and filled both glasses encouragingly.

"It often happens. Graham Lever had three plays running in London at the same time; then he chucked romantic comedy and tried to write a revolt-of-the-younger-generation problem play. . . ." Manders omitted to add that Lever had never had another play staged, but Eric's ten years of dramatic criticism enabled him to fill the gap. "George Sharpe failed again and again for eight years; he had one success and then failed for three. It would be hard to think of a man who never loses his touch. Partly it's the author and partly it's the audience; they get tired . . . and, when one kind of play succeeds, all the other men unconsciously imitate, and the managers can only see money in that one kind, so that the public gets sated. With you . . ." He paused to tear his bread into lumps and throw it into his soup. "You probably want some fresh air. You've been living in the theatre too much, you've forgotten what real people are like. If you brought that play down and read it to the company——"

His aposiopesis suggested that there would be uproar and danger to life.

"What had I better do?" Eric asked weakly.

"Frankly? Well, scrap your 'Singing Bird' and throw your pen behind the fire. Don't try to write for six months. After that, anything you like to send me . . . I hope you can eat this, by the way?"

Eric found that a sole, half-hidden by mussels, had been placed before him. Manders had taken trouble about the luncheon; he was a good fellow and had tried to soften the blow; throughout the time that they had worked together he had been patient and very human; he was trying to part now on a pleasant note. "Anything you like to send me . . ." It would certainly be read; for a time he would read it himself—the next three failures, say. And then . . . Eric wondered whether he would be able to go back to journalism. The two successful plays would keep him from starving, but he must make a livelihood again . . . and count every shilling before he spent it. The flat must go. . . .

The long triumphal progress which he had enjoyed and disdained rose up in accusing mockery. Here, then, was the end of that life-long dream of domination. For a time Lady Poynter would invite him to her house and ask when the next play was coming out, but her nature and the requirements of her sham-intellectual life demanded that she should drop him when he no longer had any tricks to display. Young Forbes Standish or Carlton Haig—"most promising young playwrights"—would take his place. Perhaps some one like George Oakleigh, who liked him personally, would ask what had become of him; and Lady Poynter would answer easily: "I haven't seen him for a long time. I must find out whether he's in London and get him to lunch one day." And then young Forbes Standish would begin to criticize "The Bomb-Shell" or the

"Divorce" with bland patronage. And every one at the Thespian would be tactful and considerate.

"I feel as if I should never be able to write anything again," Eric sighed. "This is the second—facer I've had. There was a novel I started. . . . I'm used up, Manders."

"Take a holiday and don't talk rot!"

Conversation languished through the rest of the meal, and Eric hurried back to his office, pretending that he could not spare time for coffee or a liqueur. It was an office which he had once hated, because it absorbed time and strength which he needed for his own work; he had treated it cavalierly, from time to time writing letters of resignation and throwing them into a drawer. As he settled to the familiar table in the crowded, ill-lit room, he wondered whether he would be of the lucky number for whom the Government service would find openings at the end of the war. He had yet to prove that he could earn a living again as a journalist; and efficiency mattered little in a civil servant, for, if his work were good, some one else would get the credit, and, if it were bad, it would be undiscovered. . . .

A drawling voice from the War Office broke in upon his musings. Had not Mr. Lane been making enquiries about a Captain Waring? His name was on the next list of prisoners to be transferred to Switzerland; his relations would be informed officially.

Eric telephoned at once to Colonel Waring and Barbara. As he dressed for dinner, Agnes arrived in a laden car with both her parents, clamorous for help in securing passports. They were staying at the Charing Cross Hotel with their boxes packed, waiting for further news, and the radiance in their eyes scorched him. Barbara had received the news almost without comment; he wondered what manner she would shew him; perhaps this was the last time that they would ever meet. . . .

"I'm not *sure* that her ladyship's dressed yet. . . . If you wouldn't mind waiting, sir. . . . I *have* taken the paper into her ladyship's room. . . . I hope you've been keeping well, sir. . . .?"

Eric started in physical pain at the familiar friendliness of the old butler. The little confidences, introduced with a deprecatory cough, floated down from a height one stair above him. Barbara's room, as ever, was in chaos; her kitten, roused by his entrance, stretched herself and arched her back. Then the other door opened, and Barbara hurried in. Her arms were soft and cool as ever against his cheeks, and he caught a well-remembered breath of carnations as her head bent low on to his breast. He held her close; but his pressure suddenly relaxed, and he stepped back.

"Don't you like kissing me any more?" she asked. "I've been hungry for you all these months!"

"I was thinking what it would be like if you suddenly took yourself out of my life," said Eric.

"Darling, why must you spoil the present by dragging in the future?"

"I can't think of anything else."

Barbara took his arm and led him to a chair.

"I wish you didn't look so frightfully ill," she whispered. "Have you been missing me? My dear, what a mess I seem to have made of our lives! Sit down! Let me take care of you! Let me do what I can for you, darling! It isn't much!"

"I don't think I'd better stay, Babs," said Eric with nervous indecision. "I'm bad company; I shall only get on your nerves and upset you."

The girl shook her head sadly.

"I'm not so happy that there's much to spoil. Eric, I sometimes think you don't quite understand. I'm not miserable because I want Jack and can't get him. I don't

know whether I want him or not; that's what makes the suspense such a hell. . . . There was a time when I wasn't sure whether I was in love with him or not. . . . He was stronger than I was, he could have done anything with me. If I hadn't felt his power, I should have paid no attention to him, he couldn't have hurt me, I shouldn't have wanted to punish him. Is that love? I suppose it's one form. . . . When I see him . . . if he says he wants me . . . I don't know what I shall feel like. Love . . . ordinary love. . . . There's never been anything to equal my love for you. . . . So it hasn't been easy for me, has it? Ever since I met you, I've pined to know what *was* going to happen to me."

Eric looked away and was silent for several moments. She had made a romance of her oath to Jack and had played dramatically with alternate ecstasy and despair, seeing herself as a woman cursed by God. She made a romance of her twin loves and dual obligations, seeing herself as a woman fated to blight all who loved her. She lived for "situations" and conflicts, experimenting in emotion; already a garment of romance had been woven round Jack.

"I came to tell you that I'd seen the Warings to-day," Eric said at length. "They're off to Switzerland as soon as they can get their passports. If you'd care . . . I mean, I can write a letter from my office and enclose anything; it wouldn't be censored then."

Barbara bent her head until her trembling lips were hidden from him.

"It's like you to think of that! Nobody's ever loved any one as you love me! But I won't, Eric. If *he* wants me . . ."

Eric stared at the fire, kicking one heel against the other toe. If she was in agony of spirit, he could have sworn that she was enjoying the agony.

"Yes, I love you more than any one else ever has. . . .

It gives you enormous gratification. . . . But I wonder if you think it's anything more than your own cleverness. I suppose you have some love for me. . . . But, if he wants you, I shall drop out of your life. . . . I was happy, I didn't need you! You wrapped yourself round my life until you saw that I couldn't do without you, and then—*if—he—wants you!* What have you left for me?"

"Is it nothing to have brought me happiness?" she asked; but his deep-toned reproach, unrehearsed, unstudied and faltering, had broken through her surface emotions and shattered her self-absorption. "Eric, I'm not every one! Your work——"

"D'you think I can ever write again? You never *did* think much of anything I wrote——"

"You know that I was only teasing you! That first night, when you were so dreadfully pleased with yourself. . . . But I found you *were* human, after all, when I came home with you——"

"And broke 'the child's toy.'"

"Ah, why did you remind me of that?"

"I was reminded of it myself to-day. I'm not superstitious, but my luck *has* gone. I can't write any more."

"Eric, that's not true!"

He compressed his lips and shrugged his shoulders, resignedly.

"You know best, no doubt. Since we met, I've written the first draft of a novel, which is unreadable, and a play. . . . I sent the play to Manders about a fortnight ago."

"Without telling me? Don't you like sharing things with me any longer?"

The soft reproach in her voice maddened him. She seemed incapable of seeing that she wanted the whole of him at a time when she was herself momentarily drawing away.

"You choose a curious time to ask that question! There's

nothing to share. It's turned down, rejected. Nothing I can do to it will make it even possible. I can't write any more, I'm used up. . . . Yes, we may fairly say that my luck has gone. And that night, you may remember, you recommended me to fall in love, because it would be so good for me. . . ."

4

Since the exchange of incapacitated prisoners began, there had been so many delays and disappointments that the Warings remained in London, with what patience they could muster, until they received news that Jack's party was proceeding to Château d'Oex.

For reasons which he was at a loss to define Eric saw them off at Charing Cross. They found time amid their jubilation to be grateful to him for his trouble in making enquiries at the War Office and in expediting the issue of their passports. As chairman of his local military tribunal, the colonel could not be absent from England for any long time on end, but they were proposing tentatively and subject to Jack's condition of health to take a villa and to stay with him by turns. Agnes and her father expected to come back after a week or ten days, leaving Mrs. Waring in charge until Christmas.

As they chatted artificially by the carriage door, there was radiance in the faces of all three; the colonel seemed more upright, Mrs. Waring had shed her set, stoical calm and, with it, about ten years.

"You won't forget to write, Agnes," said Eric, as the guard bustled along the platform, breaking up the little groups like a sheep-dog.

"It may be only a line, but I'll tell you everything when we get back," she promised.

A week passed before her letter reached him.

"We got here after the most impossible journey," Agnes wrote from Château d'Oex, "and Jack came to us yesterday. You can't imagine what it was like, seeing him again when we'd NEARLY given up hope! He's very bad—but I suppose I'd better start at the beginning. When he was taken prisoner, he'd been wounded in the head and slightly gassed. The gassing doesn't matter, except that he will always have to take care of his lungs; the head wound has left a scar and a bald place, but he can cover that up. At present he gets the most awful head-aches if he tries to do any work. The Germans let him go because he was simply wasting away on the horrible food they gave him to eat, and he's like a skeleton now. But we're going to feed him up and put that right, and then it'll just be a question how much work and what kind of work he'll be able to do when he's well.

"He's alive, Eric, and that's the great thing. And he's well and strong compared with some of the ghastly wrecks that you see here. I must wait till we meet before I give you a full account of all he's been through, but Major Britwell's story was quite true so far as it went. He DID insult the guard and he WAS carried off to solitary confinement for nine months. He won't talk much about that, though, but he had a most awful time; I honestly wonder that he came through it alive and in his right mind. I could cry when I look at the men here and think what they've suffered. But they CAN'T go through it again, Eric; that's one of the terms of their release, of course. They're out of the war for good; and it may be very unpatriotic, but I for one say 'Thank God!'

"Well, I must come to business. Father and I are staying here for another week, and I want you to do a lot of jobs for us. On a separate sheet you'll find a number of things that I want you to order and have sent out here. And on the back of this you'll find a list of names and

addresses. There's so much to do, getting this house straight, that I've very little time for writing. I want you to be an angel and ring up all these people and just tell them (you know them all, I think) what I've told you.

"Jack sends love to you, and we are all deeply grateful for what you have done and what I know you will do for us. I don't think there are any other messages."

The list of names did not contain Barbara's. Eric telephoned to her as soon as he had received the letter, though he knew that she would be in bed and that a tiresome footman would say: "I don't think her ladyship's been called yet, sir. Perhaps you would ring up later." With patience he got into communication with her and read out the first pages of the letter. When she had thanked him, he asked with trepidation whether she had heard from Jack. An hour seemed to pass while she rang for her letters and looked at the postmarks.

"There's nothing from Switzerland," she announced at length.

Eric's heart leapt with relief. Agnes had written; surely Jack could have written, too, had he wished? In the ensuing silence Barbara's voice, suddenly toneless, came back to him.

"I'm sorry, Babs, for *your* sake."

"Thank you, darling."

"I'll make a point of seeing Agnes as soon as she gets back to England," he went on.

"Thank you, darling."

"And, of course, I'll let you know anything there is to know. Very likely you'll get a letter before I see her."

"Perhaps I shall." Her voice trembled; and Eric, ceasing to weight justice or consider provocation, wished that he had Jack Waring's throat between his hands. "Well, I mustn't keep you from your work. Thank you for telling me, Eric."

"Good-bye, Babs. I suppose it wouldn't amuse you to lunch or dine with me anywhere?"

"Not to-day, I think. But I love you for asking me. Good-bye."

For a week he wrote to her twice daily, trying to forget himself in the effort to keep her amused. They met once at dinner with Lady Maitland; and it hurt him absurdly when as a matter of ritual he was detailed to see Barbara home. On the day named, Colonel Waring and Agnes arrived in London and telephoned, asking him to dine with them at their hotel.

Trepidation had become his normal mood, and Eric walked into the lounge with his teeth set and the muscles of his cheeks hard. The burgeoning happiness of Agnes was harder to bear than ever, but he achieved a tolerable effect as the undemonstrative, phlegmatic Englishman and mingled suitable congratulations with his many questions.

"I handed on the good news to every one you mentioned," he said at the end of dinner. "And to one or two others who I thought would be interested to hear it. Did he send me any jobs or messages?"

"He wants a pipe, but father can get that. I don't think he sent any messages."

Eric looked at his watch and begged to be excused. It was half-past ten, and he had telephoned to say that he would call for Barbara at eleven and bring her home from a party in Portman Square.

When he reached the house, Eric was disconcerted to learn that Barbara had already left. He was slightly less surprised, on reaching home, to find the hall ablaze with light and Barbara lying at full length on a sofa with her cloak trailing on the carpet and a bottle of *eau-de-Cologne* clutched in one hand.

She started and opened her eyes as he came into the room.

"Eric, did you go . . . ? I'm sorry! I couldn't wait, I couldn't bear being with people. I've been asleep. I've got such a racking headache, darling."

Eric took a bottle of aspirin from the drawer of his writing-table.

"Have you had any of this to-day?" he asked. "Then I can give you fifteen grains. Wait till I've got some water." He returned with a tumbler and two cushions and seated himself at her feet. "Have you heard anything fresh from Switzerland?" he asked. "Well, I'm afraid I haven't, either. I dined with Colonel Waring and Agnes to-night, as you know."

Barbara had uncovered her eyes to hold the tumbler; but she set it on the floor, as he began to speak, and shielded her face.

"H-how is he?" she asked.

"He gets tired rather quickly, but otherwise he's all right. Leading quite a normal life, I mean."

His words were deliberately chosen to shew that Jack was in a state to have written, had he wished. His choice was not wasted on her.

"And what now, Eric?" she asked.

"Isn't that for you to say?"

Barbara uncovered her eyes again and looked slowly round the room. It had become so familiar that she no longer noticed its shape or colouring. Instinctively she knew that the sofa demanded a cushion at her back and that the arm-chair between the fire and window did not. But she had never, until now, consciously observed the carpet and curtains, the breast-high white book-cases and Chippendale writing-table, since the first night when she came there and stood tossing a glass horse-shoe idly into the air and stealing curious glances at the furniture.

She recognized it all now and remembered her earliest

emotions, remembered even telling him that the first burning cigarette would spoil his grey carpet. But her vision was blurred; she fancied herself seeing through the walls, penetrating a belt of darkness and piercing other walls beyond which she sat at supper with an undemonstrative, quietly determined young man. The jig and stamp of rag-time echoed overhead—"Dixie! All abo-o-oard for Dixie! Dixie! Tak your tickuts heere for Dixie!"; she heard her own voice—"I love that one-step. Why did you drag me away in the middle?" and Jack Waring's in answer—"Well, you ought to be grateful to me for getting you a table before the rush starts." That was a few hours before war was declared, though the long banqueting-hall of Loring Castle had resounded with rumours and expositions of war throughout dinner. Almost at once Jack asked her to marry him; she once more heard his tranquil explanation—"I've just been received into your church."

A blaze of light. . . . A thunder of voices. . . . Out of the distance she heard him saying, "In fact, you've been lying to me all along? You never intended to marry me?"

A blaze of light; and silence that made her head sing. Jack's face seemed to grow thinner and the gleam in his eyes more brightly cold. The supper-room was emptying, but neither could decide to stand up and say good-bye. Lord Summertown and a brother-officer waltzed in and became noisily cheerful in one corner. Later they heard a car driving past the open windows; George Oakleigh appeared in the doorway; Summertown's companion finished the champagne and rose to his feet protesting fretfully: "To declare war in the middle of supper is not the act of a gentleman. . . ." Then at last she had seen that she had tempted Jack to imperil his soul. . . .

War had seemed a small thing then, though Jack Summertown was to be killed within six weeks and her cousin

Jim within a year. It was a thing remote and only important as postponing her punishment from Jack.

"I must get back to London," he said suddenly. "I'm going to ask Summertown for a seat in his car."

For dragging minutes she felt her soul being crucified. While Jack stood talking in the hall or on the steps, she tried to conceal from herself what she had done and, when that was impossible, to nerve herself to make reparation. Then she was blinded by the glare of the head-lights and opened her eyes to find that the car had swept beyond reach of her voice. . . .

Once again everything was warm and dark in the summer night. . . . Slowly the distant wail of the orchestra died from her ears. She had a vague memory of going upstairs with Oakleigh and of seeing him draw Jim aside and whisper to him, but between them lingered a white face with incredulous eyes, and above the music hammered the sound of a broken sentence: "So this was your revenge?" And then, calling Jim to witness, she made the sign of the Cross and swore that she would offer herself, body and soul, to Jack, if he wanted her. . . .

The noise faded out of hearing, and she was once more in a room of blazing light; a man was looking at her, silent, white-faced and reproachful; and a new phrase was beating on her brain.

"I want to know what you're going to do now?"

She stretched out her hand; but Eric did not take it, and her eyes wandered once more idly round the room. The forgotten curtains and grey carpet, the writing-table and neat pile of manuscript flung back to her memory the summer night when she had first come to disturb his peace of mind.

"I make *every one* miserable!" she cried, and both started at the violation of their long silence.

Eric's head sank lower; but his eyes never left her face.

That night she had been like an animal tortured to madness; since that night she had taken all that his love could give her and had repaid it by torturing him to madness in his turn, by destroying his health and ruining his work.

"Eric, I *want* to give you everything, but I've sworn to God! Until I've seen Jack. . . ."

"You've broken your oath in everything but form. From the first night we met you've belonged to me in all but name."

"But won't you wait? Oh, why will you *drive* me?"

"I'm not driving you, Babs. I've not asked for anything."

She stood up and drew her cloak round her, glancing once at him and turning quickly away as she saw his hunched body and haggard face. One after the other she slowly drew on her gloves, looking with misty eyes for her bag. As she moved to the door, Eric rose and opened it, gathering up his overcoat with the other hand. They had parted like this so often that he no longer seemed to care. . . . A four-wheeler was ambling along Ryder Street, and he hailed it. Neither spoke until it drew up opposite her house and she saw him fumbling with the handle. Then she laid her fingers on his wrist and chokingly bade him stop.

"I'll marry you, Eric," she said.

"Thank you, Barbara."

She hurried out before he could kiss her and stood with face upturned and eyes tightly shut. God, who had heard the oath taken and broken, was free to strike her now; if He held His hand, it was because He had more subtle punishment in store. . . .

Barbara pulled her cloak over her chest and ran despairingly into the house.

"Loneliness may be so intolerable that I believe God would forgive us our blindest groping after alleviation. But would God forgive me, if, in my groping, I brought such misery of loneliness to another, knowing now what manner of thing it is?"—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STRONGEST THING OF ALL

"Tam saepe nostrum decipi Fabullinum
Miraris, Aule? Semper homo bonus tiro est."
MARTIAL.

I

"If you care for a six-months' lecturing tour in America," wrote Grierson, *"I have an unrivalled offer. You would start in the New Year. . . ."*

His agent's letter was the first that Eric opened on the morning after Barbara promised to marry him. As he lay half-awake, waiting to be called, he realized that something had changed the foundations of his life; he was at peace, well and strong, with a heart tuned for adventure and a new tireless energy.

Six o'clock. . . . Seven. . . . Eight. . . . He carried the telephone into the smoking-room, lest he should be tempted to disturb Barbara, and paced bare-foot up and down, wondering how to inaugurate the new life. In marrying a Protestant, she would forfeit the money which she had received under her god-father's will; henceforward he must work and earn for two. In his safe lay a brown-paper parcel containing the manuscript of a novel, unopened since the day when Gaisford so contumeliously flung it back at him. Eric carried the despised book into his bedroom and began to skim the pages. With his new sense of power, he would so re-write it that the doctor should eat humble-pie; and there would be a slice for

Manders too. It was no good trying him with another version of the "Singing-Bird"; but "Mother's Son," which had lain neglected ever since it was sent back three years before, needed only a word of change and a touch of polish. October, November, December. . . . Eric would be ready for America in the New Year.

The next letter was from Agnes, begging him to write occasionally to Jack; the next from Lady Lane, wondering when he was coming to Lashmar. A firm of topical photographers respectfully begged leave to send a representative by appointment to interview Mr. Lane and to enrich their gallery with a few camera-studies of the house and of the author at work. The other letters were invitations and charitable appeals.

At ten o'clock he telephoned to ask when he could see Barbara, but was told that she had not yet been called. After two more unsuccessful attempts, he sent a note by hand, inviting himself to tea, and spent the rest of the morning at work on the manuscript of his novel. Shortly before luncheon his interviewer arrived with an assistant bearing a camera, and for half an hour the flat was filled with the smoke and powder of the magnesium flares. Eric submitted sheepishly to being "discovered" looking (in profile) out of his dining-room window, to being "interrupted" at his desk (three-quarter face), to being found taking a moment's respite for thought and a cigarette (full face, with his back to the smoking-room fire); finally he was dressed up in hat and coat and shewn to be saying good-bye in the hall. While the assistant packed up his camera and tripod, Eric allowed himself to be interrogated on his past and future work, his plans and views of art.

"Have you anything *new*?" asked the interviewer. "I've got all the old stuff out of *'Who's Who.'*"

Eric spoke vaguely of the novel, the play and the course of lectures in America, remembering the threadbare com-

monplaces of such illustrated interviews as he had read; it were fruitless to fancy that he could vary the form or fact of what was being so industriously scribbled down.

"Nothing expected for some months? I must work up the back stock. I shall want you to tell me in a minute what *started* you writing plays. . . . Now, about your engagement?"

"My engagement?" Eric echoed.

The man nodded and moistened the end of his pencil in anticipation.

"Why, that's what I'm here for! I don't *say*," he added apologetically, "that this stuff wouldn't stand by itself—or come in useful, anyway."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow."

The man looked at him in patient surprise.

"We supply all the pictures for '*The World and His Wife*,'" he explained. "They 'phoned through to know if we could let them have up-to-date photographs of you and Lady Barbara Neave——"

"But you spoke of an engagement."

"Isn't it true, then?"

"This sort of thing is really intolerable!" Eric cried. "I don't want to tell other people how to run their business, but in common decency your firm might wait for an official announcement in '*The Times*' instead of circulating these rumours——"

"It's only a rumour, then?" said the interviewer blankly, pocketing his note-book.

As he walked to Berkeley Square, Eric decided that, by telling Barbara of his encounter, he would annoy her without bringing relief to himself. The announcement, when it came, would be made with imposing ceremony after a meeting between his father and Lord Crawleigh, an adjustment of religious differences and a distressingly material discussion of settlements. There would be ponderous

debates and irritating disagreements; Barbara and he both needed a respite for recuperation. . . .

"I telephoned three times this morning," said Eric, as he was shewn into the drawing-room. "I did so want to talk to you! I was so happy I couldn't sleep."

"I couldn't sleep, either," said Barbara huskily, holding out one hand and covering her eyes with the other.

"Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"If you like. It's your right now."

Eric let fall her hand and drew back, biting his lip.

"That's not a very pretty thing to say, darling," he murmured.

"I'm sorry. . . . I've been haunted all night. It seemed as if God *must* strike me down. . . . And, whenever I fell asleep, Jack was there, reproaching me, mocking me——"

"He's had his chance," Eric interrupted sharply. "You start absolutely free."

"You mean he's—rejected me?"

After the tragic talk of God's striking her down for taking His name in vain, Eric could not attune himself readily to a whimper of wounded vanity. Barbara's dramatic intensity had hitherto been convincing, and he had never imagined that she was unhappy because she had offered herself to a man and he had repelled her.

"I mean it's—all over. You've no reason to reproach yourself, Babs. . . . I want to talk to you about seeing your father——"

She stopped him with a shudder, and Eric found a difficulty in curbing his impatience. Trying a fresh cast, he described his latest invitation to lecture in America. Barbara listened with half her attention, mechanically agreeing that it would be an experience and a change, mechanically accepting his figures and wounding him with an indifference which was made greater by her early love of sharing his triumphs with him. He hunted through a pile

of letters and gave her one in which the previous occupant of his flat offered generous terms for the remainder of the lease.

"We must decide some time when we're going to be married," he said, "and where we're going to live."

"*Please, Eric!*"

He looked at her in amazement and drew slowly away from her side, walking to the fire-place and resting his forehead on his arm.

"I—don't . . . I don't understand what's the matter," he murmured at length. "Last night . . . You did it of your own free will, Babs. . . . And unless you wanted to hurt me more completely and ingeniously than you've ever succeeded in doing before——"

The girl winced and covered her face with her hands.

"I wouldn't hurt you for the world!" she whispered. "Ah! God! I wish I'd never met you, I wish I'd never been born! Don't you *see* that I couldn't go on taking, taking, taking with both hands—all your sweetness and gentleness, everything—and giving you nothing in return? When you said that I'd spoiled your work . . . Didn't I see that I'd already ruined your health and made you miserable? I *tried* to make amends, but it wasn't in my power. I ought never to have given you that promise!"

"Don't you love me any more, Babs?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, what have I done since last night?"

"You haven't done anything. . . . It was a letter. . . . You remember about Jim Loring's ball just before the war——"

Eric drew her head on to his shoulder and kissed her.

"My darling, that's all so long ago! Why distress yourself with it now?"

"Jack was staying with the Knightriders," she persisted. "Kathleen Knightrider's the only soul who's ever sus-

pected. . . . *I* never told her. She's heard that Jack has been sent to Switzerland and she wrote this morning to—to congratulate me! I tried to make amends to Jack too. . . . Oh, the mockery of it! All last night I saw the two of you pulling, pulling . . ."

"He's had his chance," Eric told her again.

"I wish God *had* struck me down," she whispered.

Eric invented an excuse to leave early, for, when Barbara was not reproaching herself for the engagement, she affected the abject humility of a slave whom he had bought for his pleasure. Perhaps she was amusing herself with a new emotion, perhaps she wanted to keep him alert and suspended, perhaps she enjoyed the vision of herself torn between the two men who wanted her more than anything in the world. . . .

2

For the second morning in succession Barbara did not telephone. Eric waited until noon and then asked her to dine with him.

"I will, if you—want me to," she answered with the new servile listlessness; and he wondered again whether she was trying to exact some novel abandonment of adoration or to exhaust him by passive resistance. "I believe we *have* people dining," she added.

"Well, choose some other night," he suggested.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Nothing matters. And I'm going to the country to-morrow."

"But I thought you were going to be in London till Christmas."

"I'm supposed to be ill," she answered and hung up the receiver before he could say anything more.

Eric returned to his work, affecting unconsciousness of her alternating indifference and hostility. In the afternoon

Agnes Waring telephoned to say that she was unexpectedly in London and would like to have tea with him. He welcomed her cordially, only hoping that she would not stay long enough to clash with Babs, and, guiltily reminded of her letter, put aside his work and began writing to Jack. Once or twice, as he paused to fill his pipe, the old feeling of duplicity came back, as on the Sundays when he walked home from Red Roofs in jubilation after Agnes had told him with her unchanging composure that there was still no news of her brother. And now he was writing a gossipy, facetious letter. . . . Eric tore the envelope in two—and then hesitated. Jack had been given his opportunity, and he had not taken it.

Agnes did not arrive until nearly six o'clock and then came attended by a young officer.

"You remember Mr. Benyon," she said. "We brought him to dine at the Mill-House last year. He hadn't seen 'The Bomb-Shell,' so we went to the *matinée* to-day."

"Jolly good, if I may say so," murmured Benyon. "Hope you don't mind my buttin' in like this? Agnes said——"

"I obviously couldn't come here alone, Dick," she interrupted; and Eric wondered whether they would have left before Barbara came alone to dine with him.

He wondered too what intimacy Agnes had reached with this young man who was beginning to recur in her life and conversation. They had attained the Christian name milestone without passing it; and she seemed to have brought him as a challenge. Whenever Eric flagged in attention, Agnes brought Benyon up like an army of reserve; whenever Benyon fancied that he had won a position, she rounded on her own reinforcements and admitted Eric to a private intimacy of conversation about Jack. It was a new part for her to play, but no woman seemed able to resist the intoxication of having two men interested in her

at the same time. If only she knew that his interest had died more than a year ago, on the night when Barbara sat in that room, on that sofa. . . . Perhaps she did know. He caught her looking at him with an expression which changed almost before their eyes met. Was it desperation, defiance, an indifferent resolve to give him one last chance—or his own hypercritical fancy?

They were still talking when Barbara was announced.

"Gracious! Is it *eight*?" Agnes cried, looking at her watch. "I thought it was only seven. We must fly. Dick's taking me to a *revue*."

"Won't you wait for a cocktail?" Eric asked. "By the way, I don't think you know Lady Barbara Neave. Miss Waring, Babs. Mr. Benyon."

The two girls shook hands, and Agnes began searching for her gloves and purse, hurriedly declining Eric's invitation.

"I used to know your brother quite well before the war," said Barbara. "I was so thankful to hear your good news."

Agnes looked up with a quick smile.

"We never *quite* lost hope," she said.

"Eric told me that you and your people had been out to see him in Switzerland. How did you find him?"

The smile died away in wistfulness.

"Well, he's alive, and that's the great thing," Agnes answered. "The doctors out there don't seem to think that he'll ever be able to do much work with his head again; he'll probably have to give up the bar and live out of doors. You can understand that, when a man's just begun to get a practice together——"

"But is that quite certain?" Barbara interrupted.

"N-no. But it seems probable. There's a report that some of the bad cases are going to be sent home. Then we shall see."

Eric watched the faces of the two girls. Barbara's expressed nothing more than the conventional sympathy of one stranger hearing of another's misfortune; a few months earlier Agnes had not known that Jack and Barbara were even acquainted.

"How soon do you expect him?" asked Barbara.

"Oh, I don't think anything's been decided yet. And you know how long these things take. . . . Eric, if I'd had any idea how late it was . . . !"

He accompanied her to the door and returned to find Barbara still standing, still in her cloak. The flicker of animation which she had presented on meeting Agnes had died down, and she was again the sport of man and the plaything of fate.

"I like her, Eric," she remarked thoughtfully. "Why don't you marry her? Any one can see she's in love with you."

"You're the only person in the world I want to marry," he answered.

Barbara's face twisted in a spasm of pain.

"God! How it hurts when you say that! Eric, I shall make you miserable and be miserable myself! I love you; you know I love you! But I don't want to marry you. Why don't you forget me? Go away——"

"Forget you!" Eric gripped her by the shoulders. "What d'you think would be left, if I lost you?"

Her eyes opened wide with wonder.

"You can't love me as much as that, Eric!"

"I love you so much that I'd sooner have an air-raid to-night and a bomb on my head here, now, than lose you! You're the whole world to me!"

She shook her head miserably and without hope of flattering reassurance.

"I could have killed myself when you told me that I'd destroyed your power of work," she whispered. "And to-

night, when that girl said that Jack might never be able to work again . . . It's what I should feel, if we married and I couldn't bear children! I should be incomplete, useless!"

"But *you're* not responsible."

"I might make things easier. . . ."

So compassion was coming to reinforce or supplant vanity. . . . Eric felt that he knew Barbara's moods in advance. Lady Knight rider—a curse on her name—had started by setting every nerve on edge; the sight of Agnes Waring—with Jack's eyes, hair and voice—had completed her discomfiture; and Barbara had been morbidly drawing one unhappy picture after another. Jack was incapacitated; and, with his pride, he would never win through pity what he had failed to win on merit. Incapacitated or not, Jack was a pauper; and, with his fantastic honour, he would regard himself as an outcast from Barbara's society.

"Even if he can't go back to the bar," said Eric at length, "his father will have no difficulty in getting him a job. Lord Waring could take him on as his agent."

"Oh, I never thought he'd starve! But it must be such a disappointment."

"Well, the war's been such a mix-up that seven men out of ten will change their careers, when they come back. . . . Babs . . . do you care for Jack as much as that?"

She looked up quickly with a gleam of hope in her eyes.

"Are you going to—forget my promise?"

"No! I asked whether you cared for Jack as much as all that."

Barbara shook her head in bewilderment.

"I've given you my heart, Eric. But I owe Jack my soul."

Behind the neat phrasing of the professional trafficker in emotions, Eric felt that she was trying to weary him of their forty-eight hours' engagement. . . .

At the beginning of November Eric went to Lashmar for a long week-end. After the first days of his engagement he had hardly seen or heard anything of Barbara. She was presumably at Crawleigh Abbey, but for a week she answered no more than one letter out of three; after that, with a sense that he could do nothing right and that they were fretting each other's nerves, he ceased to correspond and was trying to absorb and exhaust himself with work. Now his novel was in the agent's hand, and "Mother's Son" had been sent to Manders.

As he dawdled before a book-stall at Waterloo, Eric's eye was caught by "*The World and His Wife*" contents' bill, which announced, with other attractions, an "Illustrated Interview with Mr. Eric Lane." There had not been time for him to receive the article from his news-cutting agency, and he bought a copy to read in the train. The pictures were well reproduced, and he was by now so hardened to the perverse inaccuracy and genial blatancy of the letter-press that he hardly blushed at the aspirations which were attributed to him, until his attention was arrested in mid-paragraph by Barbara's name. Collecting himself and glancing almost guiltily round the somnolent carriage, he turned back to the beginning.

"Rumour has been busy with the names of Mr. Lane and of Lady Barbara Neave, only daughter of the Marquess of Crawleigh. No official announcement has been made, but the young people have been going about together a good deal lately; some of our readers may have seen them at the PREMIÈRE of 'The Bomb-Shell.' The Stage has of recent years surrendered so much of its beauty and talent to the Peerage that it is high time for the Peerage to make this romantic return to the Stage. . . . Mr. Lane's advice to budding playwrights is reminiscent of Mr.

Punch's famous advice to those about to marry—'Don't.' Though the 'Divorce' was his first play to be produced, it was not the first that he had written; like most authors, he had to buy experience. . . ."

There was nothing in the rest of the article to incriminate him, but the offending paragraph was enough in itself. Guiltily Eric looked round a second time. Two of his fellow-passengers, slumbering with mouths agape, were clutching "*The World and His Wife*" to their stomachs; it was the one periodical of later date than "*Punch*" and the monthly reviews which his parents took in at the Mill-House. Saturday was made eventful by its appearance; even Sir Francis interested himself in the full-page studies of actresses and *débutantes*, the house-party groups and snapshots of celebrities in the Park. . . .

As he climbed into the car Eric was careful to let Sybil see that he was carrying the paper in his hand. She had scarcely wormed her way out of the traffic and shot free along the Melton road before she nodded towards the bulging strap of his despatch-box.

"Is that true, Ricky?"

"Is what true?"

"That you're engaged to that woman?"

"Does the paper say so?" Eric enquired loftily. "By the way, Barbara Neave is a great friend of mine, and I don't very much care about hearing her described as 'that woman. . . .' I think the paper only said that 'rumour' had 'been busy with' our 'names.' Rumour's been damnable busy; it won't leave us alone!"

His sister was silent for some moments.

"I hope to *Heaven* you're not going to make a fool of yourself with her," she exclaimed at length. "She'll wear you out, spoil your work, make you bankrupt in a month——"

"Isn't this rather sweeping about some one you've never even met?" Eric interposed gently.

"You take such jolly good care that we shouldn't meet her," Sybil answered at a tangent.

While he dressed for dinner Lady Lane came into his bedroom, more diplomatic but no whit less insistent. As his mother, she was prepared to make the best of everything and to suppress her own feelings; but, if Eric had committed a crime, he could not have felt greater distaste in putting her off with half-truths.

"You'll tell us—when there's anything to tell?" begged his mother, as they went down to dinner; and Eric felt that he might have saved his elaborate prevarications for a more gullible audience. Sir Francis made no direct allusion throughout the week-end, but, as they sat over their wine on the first night, he enquired spasmodically how old Eric was, how much money he had made during the last year and what literary ventures he had in contemplation.

It was a relief to walk over to Red Roofs next day and have tea with Agnes Waring and her father. For an hour he was spared even indirect references to the unhappy interview, though in his over-sensitive condition he fancied that Agnes was unwontedly frigid in manner, as though a new barrier had been placed between them. Conversation centred about her brother. Humanly speaking, he would be released from Switzerland within a few weeks and would come either to Paris or London; he was, of course, debarred from active service, but the War Office would no doubt test his capabilities of health and brain either in Whitehall or at the Ministère de la Guerre. Eric could count on seeing him almost any day—in England, or, if he could invent a mission, in Paris.

Only when she had walked through the garden to send him on his way across the fields did Agnes touch on the

offending article. They were standing on opposite sides of a sun-dial at the end of a fruit-walk; and both were recalling the earlier Sundays when Eric had asked with sympathetically lowered voice: "No news of Jack, I suppose?"

"You're looking as if you wanted a holiday," Agnes volunteered.

"I've been rather worried lately," Eric answered vaguely.

"Not about that——" She looked at him and moved round, slipping her hand through his arm. "*I* shouldn't worry about a thing like that! She's so well-known that the papers are on to her like cats on a mouse. . . . I liked her that night I met her, Eric."

"It makes my relations with her rather difficult," he laughed.

"But all you've got to do is not to meet her!" Agnes explained in a tone of convincing reason.

"She's—*one* of the greatest friends I've got," he said.

Agnes rubbed gently at the tarnished motto on the dial.

"That makes it rather difficult, of course," she said at length.

And then it seemed easiest for him to shake hands and walk away without adding anything.

His family by itself on one side, Agnes by herself on the other would not have spurred Eric to action. He was precipitated by the felicitations of an almost complete stranger in the train on Monday morning and held to his course by a succession of congratulatory notes and telephone messages.

"*I don't know,*" he wrote to Barbara on reaching home, "*whether you have seen this week's 'World and His Wife.' There's a rather broad hint at our engagement, and I'm receiving congratulations. Isn't this a golden opportunity for publishing the news?*"

Barbara's reply was tuned to an uncompromising note which Eric had met but once before—at the beginning of his

last illness, when he had threatened to go away from her and the threat had misfired; when, too, he—"one of our conquerors"—had broken down and cringed to her; and she, with drawn cheeks and leaden eyes, had laid his head on her bosom and caressed him, not as a conqueror or a lover, but as a tired, sick child.

"I am so very miserable," she wrote. "Sometimes I could almost wish to die—just to get us all out of this terrible tangle. You'd be happier—after a time, when you'd got over the first feeling of loss and loneliness; and, however lonely and unhappy you'd be without me, it would be nothing to the misery I should bring you, if we were foolish enough to marry. Let me be your devoted, your very loving, very grateful friend! If you try to marry me, you'll be marrying my name, my voice, my clothes, my body; you won't be marrying me; you'll waste your divine love on a woman whose soul is at the other end of the world. Whatever happens, I must do you a hideous wrong."

Eric read the letter three times and left it unanswered.

A very little more of this erotic battledore-and-shuttlecock would send them both out of their minds. It was a mistake to write, when both needed a holiday. He telephoned to his agent and walked to Covent Garden for a consultation about the lecturing-tour in America.

"I'm worn out, I must have a complete change," said Eric. "And I want to start at once."

Grierson was surprised out of his habitual placidity by the nervous vehemence of Eric's manner.

"You'll need a month or two to prepare your lectures," he pointed out.

"You can begin making the arrangements immediately. London's getting on my nerves rather. Three months in the country, three months out there—oh, the war may be over by then. . . . I'm sick of England. . . . If the war's

still going on, I shall stay away and go on to Japan. You'll fix that, Grierson?"

He jumped up restlessly and was starting for the door when his agent recalled him.

"Are you in a hurry?" he asked. "There are one or two things I want to talk to you about. Rather good news," he added. "Staines have accepted your novel on our terms. I had a fight over the advance, but your name carried you through."

Eric was not interested in the figures. He was recalling the mood in which he had sent the manuscript to Grierson, when he was working under inspiration. He had grudged the hours wasted on sleep and food when he might have been working for Barbara.

"I seem to have more money than I know what to do with," he answered shortly. "By the way, has Manders given tongue yet about the play?"

"'Mother's Son'? Yes, I wrote you last night. Didn't you get my letter? Oh, he's quite enthusiastic about it. He suggests a few small changes——"

"Manders would," Eric rejoined from habit rather than resentment. He did not care if he never wrote another play; he did not care if they returned to him battered and dog's-eared after months of delay and desultory travel—as in the old days. Manders might cut the thing about to the top of his vulgar Philistine bent.

"He wants to begin rehearsing at once," Grierson went on slowly. "And the 'Divorce' is being revived at the Emperor's. You'll have three plays running in London at the same time."

"I'm not going to stay in England to please Manders," Eric interrupted.

"He'd like to have a talk with you about it before you leave London," said Grierson.

Eric caught himself yawning. It was such futility to discuss a play in which he had lost all interest.

On his return, he yawned again over his letters. It was futile to hear from people in whom he had lost all interest, though a Swiss stamp and a hand-writing which he had almost forgotten quickened the beating of his heart.

"My dear Eric," he read.

"Your letter was a joy to me! Please go on writing. You cannot imagine how home-sick I feel. I want the smell of London again, I want to hear people talking my own language and I want to see 'em in bulk, drifting slowly down the Strand from the Temple. Do you remember the old days when we lived together in Pump Court? I want to go and lunch at the club again and have a little dinner at the Berkeley, say, and go on to a theatre, decently dressed with other people decently dressed too. There's a chance—one lives on hope from day to day—that I may be sent home; I don't seem to be getting any better here: all goes well for a time, and then I get such a head-ache as I would not sell for the minted wealth of the world. Of course, that makes work of any kind rather a problem, and I see myself looking out for a job which I can do at my own convenience, when I feel up to it. The bar doesn't look particularly hopeful, if I'm unable to last out a long case or if I can't appear at all; I'm afraid my standing's hardly good enough to convince any one if I say I've got a case in another court. I think you'll have to expound to me the whole art of writing plays; that's the sort of thing for my one-hour-on-and-six-hours-off condition.

"You're such a celebrity nowadays that I suppose you simply won't look at your humble friends! I saw your first thing the last time I was home—it seems like the Dark Ages now, before my little sojourn in Mittel-Europa. I imagine you're sick of hearing it praised, especially by people who don't know anything about it, but I thought it

was an amazingly good play. The moment I was within range of English papers—this was before I got your letter—I went through the advertisements to see if you were still ‘drawing all London’ (I believe that’s the phrase) and found that yet another was going very strong. You seem to have struck oil. The best of good luck to you.

“There’s really nothing to tell you about this place. I believe you know Château d’Oex; well, there’s a little colony of British prisoners of war here, some more knocked about than others, but all pretty glad to be out of Hunland. The Swiss gave us a great reception, and we’re allowed pretty fair liberty, though we can’t wander at large over the whole of Switzerland. The War Office is very busy trying to start industries out here to keep the men employed and to give training to the unskilled so that they’ll have something to do when they’re discharged. You may remember that before I was called, I spent a year with a firm of chartered accountants, so I’m supposed to know something of book-keeping. I don’t put a very high price on my service, however, because my attendance is rather erratic.

“I suppose it’s out of the question for you to come here? Yet a holiday would do you good, I’m sure. If you can’t manage it, we must wait till the end of the war or till I’m sent back. And then I dine with you—sumptuously—and make you take me to the latest of your popular successes.

“Write again, old man. Your letter did me no end of good.

“Ever yours

“Jack Waring.”

Eric read the letter twice and then locked it in a drawer. It was characteristic of the writer in that he said hardly anything of himself. That might have been expected, and there was no need to be frightened by the hand-writing. A moment later he unlocked the drawer and enclosed the

letter in a note to Barbara, reminding her that he had long ago promised to let her have any news that came to him. The promise was before their engagement; but the letter would shew her that Jack was capable of writing.

A week later Jack wrote again.

"I've been shifted to Paris, no longer a prisoner of war, but a more or less free man. I could probably get discharged to-morrow, if I liked, but the army does pay me SOMETHING, and I haven't yet found anything else that will.

"For the last fortnight I've been doing a turn of French-Without-Tears as an interpreter at the MINISTÈRE DE LA GUERRE. There was so little work to do that the job suited me rather well. Alas! it suited equally well certain others who had a better claim to it, and I'm being transferred to England next week with a vague promise of some light duty at the War Office. The best thing about the new arrangement is that I shall be at home and shall have a chance of seeing you. 'Mr. Eric Lane, the well-known dramatist and author, in his charming Ryder Street residence.' As you probably know, the papers have been full of you; the gaping world now knows to the last inch of your benevolent smile exactly how you work and smoke a cigarette and dress and have your pyjamas laid out. If the photographs are at all good, you seem to have got rather a comfortable billet. Talking of which, if you hear of any cheap and handy rooms within a hundred miles of Whitehall, you might keep me in mind. People out here tell me that London's rather congested. . . ."

There was a chance, Eric reflected, that Jack might have glanced at the pictures in *"The World and His Wife"* without troubling to read the letter-press. It was so unlikely as not to be worth entertaining. That he had read of the rumoured engagement was as certain as that he made no comment upon it.

Whether he had seen it or not was trivial. All this

pernickety analysis was flooded by the overwhelming fact that Jack was coming home. Germany, Switzerland, Paris, London; nearer and nearer. Within seven days he might be taking train for Crawleigh—to shew what was left of him and to ask whether Barbara wished to withdraw her promise. Within six days she might be begging to be set free, appealing to Eric's love and magnanimity. . . .

He determined that, if they were to play battledore-and-shuttlecock with their capability for self-sacrifice, he would strike the first blow and stand ready to see what return she would make.

"Darling Babs, it's essential that I should see you for a moment," he wrote. *"And that as soon as possible. Are you going to be in London next week? If so, please fix your own time. If not, what about this? I'm going down to Lashmar for the week-end and, if you can meet me for thirty seconds at Crawleigh station, I'll come straight on to you on Saturday and then get a train back to Winchester. I can't come to the Abbey, obviously, or every one would want to know what was up. The business in hand won't take a moment to discuss, but it's ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE that we should discuss it at once."*

As he posted the letter, Eric was conscious that he could have said all that was necessary without a meeting, but he knew well that it was far easier for her to be collected and valiant on paper and at a distance. If Barbara chose to accept his sacrifice, she should do it in his presence, looking into his eyes.

"Has something awful happened?" she wrote in reply. *"You do FRIGHTEN me so, when you write like that! I have to come up on Sunday for a charity concert at the Olympic, where I'm a patroness or something. If you really want to see me for only a moment, is it possible for you to meet me at Winchester? The train gets in at 12.29 and leaves at 12.33 (aren't I getting clever with the time-table? As a*

matter of fact I made father's secretary work it all out for me). If you'd like to wait on the platform, I'll put my head out of the window and we can be together for a moment. Dear Eric, I do hope you're not in any kind of trouble! When you become telegraphic in manner, I always grow nervous. Barbara."

There was suppressed excitement at the Mill-House on Saturday night, when he put in a claim for the car, announced his intention of driving himself and instructed the maids with unusual particularity to see that he did not oversleep himself.

"We're being very mysterious," murmured Sybil.

Eric smiled and said nothing.

He went to bed early in hope that a long night's rest would steady his nerves for an interview which would not be the less trying for its brevity and which, he now saw, had been made inevitably dramatic. It was a perfect autumn morning, as he climbed into the car, with a scented mist rising before his eyes, under the mild warmth of a November sun; Lashmar Woods flaunted their last dwindling recklessness of colour, from ivy-green through fading red to russet and lemon-yellow. He had a rare feeling of peace, as he surrendered to the voiceless magic of the still countryside and to whimsical memories of his own childhood. Life was so much simpler then! Life would again be so much simpler when he had Babs driving by his side. . . . (If he could only drag her from the train and take her home to astonish and subjugate his parents! It would be worth a little mystery to effect that!)

If she dropped like a stone out of his life, he would raise both hands to Heaven and pray God to take away his reason and draw a sponge across his memory. . . .

Barbara was leaning out of the window, as the train drew into the station. Eric ran to her compartment; but for a time they were victimized by the nervous antics of an

old lady with cumbrous luggage, who stood in the doorway calling with shrill helplessness for a porter.

"I see your play's going to be produced at the end of the month," said Barbara, waving her hand towards a paper on the opposite seat.

"Are you coming with me to the first night?" he asked.

"Of course!" She watched the departure of the old lady with ill-suppressed eagerness. "Thank goodness, she's gone! What is it, Eric? Why did you want to see me like this?"

"I always want to see you!" he laughed uneasily. Ever since he received her letter, he had been rehearsing an effective little speech; but it was gone from his mind now, and he found himself nervously clearing his throat. "Babs, I'm in rather a hole and I want to do the right thing. For some reason you always talk about my generosity. I've been thinking it over. . . . You're absolutely free, Babs."

"But—why?" she asked blankly.

"Before writing to you, I'd heard from Jack. He'll probably be in England within a week. I—don't want you to feel . . ." He had to leave the sentence unfinished.

Barbara had become very pale and for a moment she said nothing.

"This—doesn't mean that you're—saying good-bye?" she faltered.

"It's a present, not an ultimatum," Eric answered sharply.

So she could still try to make the best of both worlds.

"You've always been wonderfully generous!" she whispered. "I can never repay you."

From her tone and phrasing Eric knew that he had failed. His own sacrifice neither stirred nor shamed her into equal generosity; the volley was over, and the shuttlecock had dropped to the ground.

"Have you tried?" he asked sharply.

There was a whistle and a jolt, as the train began to move. Eric stepped off the foot-board, raised his hat slightly and turned on his heel. Mechanically he set his watch by the station clock. The train had come in late, but it was leaving on time.

"Rather less than two minutes, if anything," he murmured, as he started the engine. "Five weeks since we became engaged. . . ."

Half-way home he steered for a government lorry which was standing unattended by the side of the road. Something older and stronger than himself paralyzed the malevolent muscles of his arm, and the car swerved into safety. . . .

"The slavery of centuries and her own short-lived blooming have robbed woman of open initiative in sex-warfare: she forces man to make the attack, pretending indifference or ignorance. Instead of striking a bargain, she then insists on nominal surrender, which never deceives her. But she is deceived by her own false valuation; she can only see herself in the image that she makes for the beguilement of man. Vanity is the strongest thing of all."—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

CHAPTER NINE

THE EDUCATION OF BARBARA NEAVE

"The mob decrees such feat no crown, perchance,
But—why call crowning the reward of quest?"

ROBERT BROWNING: "*Aristophanes' Apology*."

I

IN the second week of November Manders began to rehearse "Mother's Son," and, after two attendances, Eric retired to Lashmar for uninterrupted work on his American lectures. Jack might reach London any day, and he could not face a meeting nor wait to be told of an encounter between Jack and Barbara. His own rash magnanimity had set her free and kept him in chains; he had always been so indulgent that he more than half suspected a strain of kindly contempt in her; she had once told him that they would be miserable together because he would always be too gentle to keep her in order. . . . Any day now might see him dismissed like an outworn servant.

With native caution he did not pledge himself to stay at Lashmar for a specified time; that would depend on Jack, on Barbara, on his own work and a dozen other things. It was essential that he should keep himself posted regularly in Jack's movements, and he walked over to Red Roofs on the morrow of his arrival. Agnes gave him all the information that she possessed, but gave it with reservation, as though she were conferring a favour; and, when he left, she walked with him to the gate of the woods and blurted out that she was engaged to Dick Benyon. As

he congratulated her, Eric remembered their last parting by the sun-dial, when she had told him not to worry even if gossiping papers coupled his name with Barbara's, when she had pointed out, too, that they could end the gossip in a day by ceasing to meet. She did not seem extravagantly happy; each had lost the other without finding the perfect substitute; but Agnes, with greater wisdom than he had ever shewn towards Barbara, had resolved that a secondary place was not enough.

After that he avoided the Warings, but Sybil returned one night from Red Roofs with a report that Jack was expected there within three days. He had seen a specialist in London and was forbidden to attempt any brain-work for three months; even the easy experiment in Paris had been a mistake. Eric's mind was busy with excuses to get back to London, for with Jack as his neighbour, invalided and bored, it would be necessary to see him daily. The Lanes were, fortunately, too much absorbed in their own life to be suspicious of sudden changes in Eric's plans; affectionate regret greeted his announcement that he was returning to London after the week-end, and his sense of the dramatic was grimly amused by the thought that his train would pass Jack's somewhere between Basingstoke and Brooklands. . . . He might almost be a criminal fleeing from justice.

A note from Jack lay on his hall table, regretting that they had not met, but promising to walk over to the Mill-House the moment that he arrived. It was followed by another, full of mock-indignation.

"If you don't want to see me, you needn't," he wrote. *"But for Heaven's sake don't bolt to the country the minute you hear I'm coming to London and then bolt back to London the minute you hear I'm going to the country."*

Of course it was all badinage; and yet, if Jack knew

everything, the badinage might cover an atrocious hint of his knowledge. . . .

"I'm losing my sense of reality!" Eric muttered.

The same post brought him a long letter from his mother. Jack had come to tea on the day of his arrival, looking very well, on the whole, though the wound on his head was still visible.

"He wants to see you," wrote Lady Lane, "and he particularly asked when you would be down here again. I'm afraid poor Jack is in for rather a dull time. He was hoping so much to be well enough to work, and the sentence of three months' complete rest is a great disappointment; but, if he'll feed up and rest, there's no reason why he shouldn't be as well as he ever was; I'm glad to say that his uncle has behaved quite well. After doing NOTHING all these years for him or Agnes or his own brother, he has at last shewn some decent feeling. If Jack has to be a partial invalid all his life, Lord Waring will give him whatever money's necessary to let him live anywhere he likes and take up any hobby he likes; if he wants to marry (I can't imagine that of Jack), there'll be a proper settlement. . . ."

If Jack, who was certainly not going to be a pauper, probably not even an invalid, had passed through London without coming to see Barbara, that meant that he did not want to see Barbara. Perhaps he *had* seen her. . . .

Eric telephoned to Berkeley Square and found his voice greeted with surprise and apprehensive pleasure.

"I thought you were in the country! You *are* getting restless, Eric! When did you come up?"

"Only two days ago. Babs . . . Jack's in England; he called here during the week-end, but of course I was away. I . . . I thought you'd like to know."

"Thank you, Eric," she answered quietly.

There was a pause which neither liked to break. At last Eric said:

"He didn't come to see you? Why don't you recognize that it's all over, Babs? You say that your soul isn't yours and that you owe it to Jack; well, he's had the chance to come and claim it."

There was a second pause followed by a sigh.

"It's hard to explain, Eric. You see, only he and I know how much he was in love with me before. I was the only person he'd ever cared for. . . . Even I didn't understand how much he loved me until that night." She sighed again. "I don't believe that, after loving me, he could suddenly cease to love me."

"You gave him pretty good provocation," Eric suggested.

"But you don't cease loving people because they behave badly to you. I've behaved abominably to *you*. You've given me everything, and all I've done in return is to make you ill and miserable. I've ruined your work, your life—you've told me so, Eric. I've been utterly selfish and heartless. You know I'm vain, you know I'm spoiled, you admit I've behaved atrociously. But you want to marry me in spite of it all."

"I love you in spite of it all."

Barbara said nothing, and her silence was a confession and answer. There were a hundred reasons why Jack had not come to see her yet; his future was uncertain, he must wait for a final verdict from his doctor, he was perhaps still chewing the cud of his resentment. And, when the first reasons were exhausted, her vanity wove a hundred more in stout, impenetrable protection against the fantastic thought that any man could tire of her.

"Oh, I wish you *didn't!*" Barbara cried at last. "Why don't you go away and forget all about me?"

She had trapped him neatly, as he had no doubt she well knew.

"I can't forget you," he answered, savagely conscious that he was presenting her with new weapons. "Whatever you did, you'd be the biggest thing in my life; I should always need you."

This time she put her triumph into words.

"Don't you think that Jack may need me as badly?"

"He's had his chance. . . ."

Eric discovered suddenly that the wire had ceased to throb. Evidently she had quietly hung up the receiver. In another moment she could only have offered to say good-bye; and that she would not do. He was beginning to know her moods and her nature very well. . . .

Lighting a cigarette, he was trying to think what he had been doing before their conversation started, when the telephone-bell rang.

"Eric? It's me, darling. We were cut off. Eric, don't be bitter with me. I've never done anything to deserve your love, but it's been so wonderful that I won't allow you to say anything which will spoil it. Some day I think you'll look back on it as the biggest thing in your life."

2

As soon as Manders announced the opening night of "Mother's Son," Eric booked his passage to New York for the following week. For the first time he informed his parents that he was leaving England and gave them to understand that he was very fully occupied. There were a hundred and one arrangements to conclude, fare-wells to take; and, when he applied to Gaisford for a medical certificate, he found himself packed off to bed with orders to stay there till the day of sailing.

"If you'll do what I tell you, I'll do my best for you," said the doctor sternly. "If you won't, Eric, on my honour I'll wash my hands of you. Now, which is it to be?"

"I shall get up for my own first night," said Eric.

"You'll do what I tell you. If you're fit to go, you shall go. But I don't think you'll be in a condition to stand the excitement of it."

Two days later Eric sent a message to Barbara, reminding her that she had promised to come with him to the first night and warning her that in all probability he would not be able to go. The doctor, he explained, insisted on absolute quiet and absence of excitement. It would have been more honest to add that the doctor had forbidden him to see any visitors; but Eric hoped that Barbara would hurry round as soon as she heard that he was ill and before he could tell her that he was not allowed to have her there. It was a bitter disappointment when his secretary brought back a message of sympathy. Later in the day he received a present of carnations and grapes. It was only when Gaisford commented on them next morning that his disappointment was mitigated.

"I saw her the other day," explained the doctor. "She was sorry to hear you were ill. I told her that I wasn't letting you see any one."

"Where did you see her?" Eric asked, trying to keep his voice unconcerned.

"At her house. The moment I'd left you. I've attended her since she was a baby, so I felt I knew her well enough to tell her once again to leave you alone."

Not until the afternoon of the production did Gaisford relax discipline; then he admitted rather grudgingly that Eric might go to the theatre if he refused all invitations to supper and came straight back to bed. He was to dine at home and he would be wise to leave the house before any one could call on him for a speech.

Eric tried to find out whether a box had been reserved for him, but by the time that he had received a reply from the theatre and telephoned to Barbara, she was not to be

found. Dinner was an agony which he strove to make as short as possible. Ordinary nervousness was reinforced by bitter contrasts of this evening with the night when "The Bomb-Shell" was produced. Then Barbara had dined with him and sat in his box, comforting him in the torturing first moments before the play had come into its own; (and he had driven a ring into her poor finger). It had been a night of triumph for them both. Never, before or since, had they been nearer. . . .

He arrived at the Regency early enough to find the house almost empty. Hiding himself behind the curtains of his box, he watched the familiar audience settling in place, recognizing friends, waving and calling out whispered greetings. Mrs. O'Rane and Colonel Grayle; Lady Poynter and Gerry Deganway; Lady Maitland and one of her boys. . . . He started and drew farther back, though he was already concealed by the curtains. Barbara had come in with George Oakleigh. They were standing in the gangway, waiting to be shewn their seats. While George disposed of his hat and coat, she threw open her cloak and pinned a bunch of carnations into her dress. They talked for a moment, studied their programmes and began talking again. After a few minutes George produced a pair of opera-glasses and took a leisurely survey of the house. Barbara looked with careless deliberation at the box from which she had watched "The Bomb-Shell"; seeing no one in it, she looked away as deliberately and glanced at the watch on her wrist.

Eric began to open a pile of telegrams. "Good wishes." "All possible success"; such a tribute had meant much to him when his first play was produced. . . . Two thirds of the stalls were full, though no doubt there would still be enough constitutional late-comers to spoil the first five minutes of the play. Why people could not take the trouble, . . . He pulled himself up and went back to the telegrams;

he would not live through the evening if he began to excite himself like this. But what he wanted was to have Barbara by his side, to feel her lips at his ear and to catch her whisper of love and encouragement—"It's going to be a tremendous success! I *will* it to be!"

He would like to catch her eye. . . . If the first act went even tolerably, he could allow himself to be seen; perhaps she would come and sit with him for the other two. . . .

The lights were lowered, there was a moment's silence, and the curtain rolled noiselessly up. Eric sat forward with his eyes fixed on the stage. Then, as the first line was spoken, he threw himself back in his chair with a smothered oath. A trim programme-seller was tripping down the gangway with mincing daintiness—down and down to the very front row of the stalls. A party of four stumbled after her, whispering and groping in the darkness, while she gave them programmes and herded them into their seats. There were whispered apologies, as they squeezed in front of their neighbours; whispered thanks as one man stood up, crushing himself back, and another stepped into the gangway to let them pass. At last they were in place! And then it was time for the two women of the party to whisper again, gesticulating for a redistribution of seats. The men fussed and fidgeted, untying their mufflers and rolling up their overcoats. And then it was time for all four to rustle their programmes. Every one was looking at them instead of at the stage; there was nothing else to look at! For three minutes they had blocked the view for everybody behind them!

Eric was looking at them himself, first indignant, then startled. . . . He could guess the identity of the first woman, though he could not see her face; of the others there was no doubt. The refraction of the foot-lights shewed him Agnes Waring, with her father in the next seat; on the other side sat Jack. There was no mistaking him; a

white circle, the size of a florin, revealed the mark of his scalp wound. . . .

After drawing back instinctively behind his curtain, Eric leaned an inch forward to steal a glance at Barbara. She was in the third row, six feet behind Jack in a direct line; like every one else she had seen the late-comers, she could not have failed to identify Jack. . . . But there was no sign of embarrassment; she did not lower her eyes or affect absorption in her programme; she was looking at the stage. . . . As in "The Bomb-Shell," there came a sudden laugh, sharp as a dog's bark; it was followed by other single laughs, by a boom of throaty, good-tempered chuckling; and the whole house was warmer. Barbara did not laugh, but her white-gloved hands clapped like a child's. She stopped suddenly and touched George Oakleigh's arm, pointing ruefully to a split thumb. Jack Waring sent up a belated rocket of laughter, which started the general laughter again; Eric saw him burying his head, shamefaced, in his hands; Barbara was peeling off the injured glove.

It was conceivable that she had not seen Jack, for she gave no sign of emotion; and, if she had seen him for the first time in more than two years, this would be the strongest emotion of her life. Yet she was watching eagerly, applauding eagerly, wholly engrossed in the play. Once, when the house was silent and concentrated on the stage, she looked round with her earlier deliberation and let her eyes rest on Eric's box. He started guiltily before remembering that she could not see him. Next she borrowed George's glasses and, after a single glance at the stage, raked the four boxes on either side.

"I propose to give the thing a trial. Every one must admit that the present position is intolerable."

The line told Eric that in twenty seconds the curtain would fall. He had hardly any idea how the play was being received, but, obviously, he must not allow any one to

see him; he could not stand mouthing inanities to a box full of people when Jack and Barbara were meeting downstairs or when they met—unexpectedly—in his presence. They were within six feet of each other. . . .

And they would meet within six seconds. . . .

There was a burst of sustained applause as the curtain fell. It rose again on the full company, fell and rose again on McGrath and Helen Graye, Constable and Lillian Hartley, Joan Castle and Manders; fell and rose again on Joan Castle and Manders alone. Evidently this play, too, was a success. The lights remained lowered, and the company came forward to take the calls—with the usual pause before Manders made his appearance, the usual extra half-minute's smiling and bowing. With practised unconcern he looked for a moment toward Eric's box and then looked away again, as though he had never expected to see any one there. With a final low bow he backed up-stage, and the heavy blue curtains tumbled into place at a half-seen movement of his hand.

As the lights went up, Eric watched the customary recrudescence of restlessness. Eager and lazy discussions began; surprised, shrill recognitions volleyed across the stalls; the men looked at their programmes to see how many acts remained and tentatively felt for their cigarette-cases. He saw George Oakleigh lean towards Barbara, glance at his watch and draw himself slowly to his feet. The movement was a signal and spur for a dozen others. Barbara moved into his place and called a greeting to Deganway who was on the opposite side; he stood up and bent over her, swinging his eye-glass.

Suddenly Eric found himself trembling. After the usual uncertainty, which he had been watching with one eye, he saw Colonel Waring and Jack squeezing past their neighbours. As they turned into the gangway, Jack stared slowly round him and raised his eye-brows in faint surprise when

he caught sight of Barbara. They exchanged bows, she held out her hand; Colonel Waring was introduced, and Deganway excused himself. A moment later the colonel bowed a second time and withdrew. Barbara pointed to the empty seat by her side, and Jack stepped across her into it.

The whole meeting was incredibly suave and unemotional. They were talking—as any other two people in the theatre were talking—without any great interest. After a few minutes Oakleigh returned and shook hands with noticeable warmth; there was a short triangular conversation before the lights were lowered; then Jack hurried back to his place.

When the curtain went up on the second act, Eric scribbled a note of congratulation and apology and sent it to Manders by the hand of a programme seller. Then he put on his hat and coat and stole out of the theatre.

3

The next morning Eric summoned his solicitor and divested himself of all domestic ties and obligations as completely as if he were leaving for the Front. A power of attorney was to be prepared; the books were to be stored, the wine sold and the flat let if he had not returned from America within a stated period. . . .

"You see, I've more money than I can spend," Eric explained. "It's well invested, so that, if I never do another stroke of work, I shall have *something* to live on. Well, my health's gone to pieces, and I want a long rest and change. This is my opportunity. I'm thirty-three; and I've seen nothing of the world outside Europe. If I start by touring from end to end of America . . ."

He was almost carried away by his own enthusiasm in sketching out the years of wandering which lay ahead. Central America, South America, the Pacific Islands, New

Zealand, Australia, Japan, China, the Dutch East Indies, Burmah, India. . . .

"This is all in confidence, of course," he interrupted himself to say. "I haven't breathed a word to my people."

He lacked courage to tell them that he was never coming back. It would be easier if the advertised three months were dragged out to six, the six to twelve. The shock would be mitigated; and he would escape a scene.

When the solicitor was gone, Eric stumbled out of bed and unlocked the safe in his dining-room. There was an infinity of papers to be destroyed and letters to be written. Lady Maitland attacked him at the ill-disguised prompting of her own conscience:

"Why have you neglected us for so long? I hoped to see you at the theatre last night, but Colonel Grayle told me that he thought you were ill. I'm so sorry; and I hope it's not serious. When you're able to get about again, will you telephone and suggest yourself for dinner? I want to talk to you about your play, which I liked quite enormously. . . ."

So he was to be lionized again—with no one to share his triumphs. . . . The next letter was from Mrs. Shelley; the next from Lady Poynter, proposing a date in the following week and asking him to telephone.

"You can accept all these for me," he told his secretary, "or as many as don't clash with anything else. I—I've got to say good-bye to a lot of people before I start," he added unnecessarily. "Keep next Wednesday free for me; I want to get my people up for that."

If Barbara's engagement was going to be published at once, he felt that he could not meet Jack after all; at one time it had seemed as though nothing mattered, but his self-control would break down at such a test. And Jack's headquarters were presumably still in Hampshire. . . .

There was no letter from Barbara next day; and he

searched "*The Times*" vainly for her name. Lunching with George Oakleigh, he met Deganway who had neither news to impart nor questions to ask; at dinner Mrs. Shelley observed with sublime innocence: "You must have been disappointed not to be able to come the other night. Barbara was there, and it was she who told me you were ill." The next day brought no tidings, and Eric had to exert all his strength to keep from writing. It was inhuman of the girl not to tell him—unless she thought that it would be easier to bear a month later, when he was three thousand miles away.

Four days of silence dulled his capacity for suffering; he felt that he would not disgrace himself even if some one appealed to him as the leading authority on Barbara's movements and asked for news of this most romantic engagement. In a week he would be shivering in the danger-zone, zig-zagging round the north coast of Ireland. The power of attorney only awaited his signature, the papers were busily announcing his departure, farewell letters and invitations were pouring in upon him.

There was so much to discuss that he found his family easy to handle. They dined in Ryder Street; and, what with inspecting the flat (which seemed now to belong to some other life) and raining down questions of no importance, they contrived not to ask anything that mattered. Yes, he was going for at least three months—perhaps more, because it would be a pity to get as far as San Francisco without going on to Japan. Yes, he would certainly be grateful for any letters of introduction that his father could give him. Yes, he had bought himself an outfit that would last him for years in all climates. . . .

Amid the primitive interrogation Eric looked up suddenly at his parents and sister. They and the two boys in Salonica and the North Sea were all that he had; he was fond of them, and they were devoted to him. His mother was talk-

ing as she had done twenty years ago, when she searched for holes in his underclothes and socks before sending him back to school; but he once caught her looking at him as though she understood. . . . His father had roused from an age-long scholar's dream to remember a friend who was now a professor at Columbia University. Sybil was as much excited as if she had been going in his place. . . . He would never see any of them again, after they had been everything to him all these years! And he was sneaking away without telling them that he would never come back.

"You'll send us a cable to say that you've arrived safely," Lady Lane was saying.

Eric promised quickly and harked back to the letters of introduction. After trying for so long not to think of Barbara, he found that he must not think of his own family. They were still expecting him back in April, "when the weather's a bit more settled."

"I only wish you weren't going so soon," said his mother regretfully. "Geoff's due for leave next month."

"Tell him I was sorry to miss him," Eric answered. "I'm afraid the boat won't wait for me."

He walked back with them to their hotel and said good-bye in the hall, explaining that he was unlikely to see them next day. He had promised to lunch with Manders and to dine with the Poynters; and, though either engagement might have been cancelled, he could not screw himself up to a second parting.

It was curious to feel, as he walked home, that he was beginning the last day of his life in London. Only once more would he unlock the street door and enter the dimly-lit hall which Barbara had invaded fifteen months before. . . . In the morning he bade awkward farewell to his secretary. On his way to luncheon he paused on the steps of the Thespian, trying to see it as a club and not as one of many places where Barbara had telephoned to him. . . . Manders, of

course, insisted on a champagne luncheon to wish him God-speed; at intervals he asked how long the tour was to be; and Eric wondered whether a suicide or a condemned man went through this recurrent sense of parting, recurrently spiced with surprise. He would never sit in the oak-panelled dining-room again, never see Manders again. . . .

Throughout the ritual of the day he could not grow accustomed to saying good-bye. It was all so familiar; he never persuaded himself that everything was over. By an error of judgement he was several minutes late in reaching Belgrave Square, as when first he dined there. Lady Poynter protested that she had given up hope of him. Her husband took him aside to enquire whether he found Gabarnac too sweet, because he had a bottle on which he would value expert opinion. It was all so like the night of fifteen months ago that Eric could not believe his passage was booked and his trunks packed. Lady Poynter began counting her guests with jerks of a fat, slow forefinger. "Two, three, five, seven, nine, eleven. . . . Then there's one more. Ah!"

She looked over Eric's shoulder as the door opened and the butler announced:

"Lady Barbara Neave."

Under the blaze of the chandelier and amid a chorus of "Babs darling!" "Hullo, Babs," Eric found no difficulty in remaining composed. She was the more surprised of the two, for, as soon as she caught sight of him, she turned to Lady Poynter, crying:

"Margaret, you must send him home at once! He's been very ill and he's no business to be out of *bed*!"

"But he's going to America to-morrow, he was telling us."

For a moment Barbara's face was blank. She recovered quickly and repeated: "*To-morrow?* I've simply lost all count of time."

"Including dinner, darling," said Lady Poynter, with a meaning glance at the clock.

It was all so familiar that Eric's sense of probability would have been outraged, if he had not been put next to Barbara.

"I'm very glad to see you again, Eric," she whispered. "Dr. Gaisford was so gloomy about you. . . . How long have you been allowed out?"

"Oh, a week."

"And you never told me? You never wrote or telephoned——"

Eric felt his face stiffening into unamiable lines as he remembered the agony of the first four days' silence.

"You never wrote or telephoned to me," he interrupted.

"The doctor told me I mustn't. He put me on my honour. I'm not sure that I didn't really break my word when I sent you those flowers." Her hand stole out and sought his under the table. "Don't you think it would have been kind to let me know? Don't you think it's possible I may have been worrying about you?"

Eric dropped his napkin and picked it up again for an excuse to escape her hand.

"Isn't it rather late in the day to begin worrying?" he asked. The girl winced and bit her lip. "I was only a bit overwrought," he added. "Now I'm rather less overwrought. There was nothing else to tell you."

"About America? I saw it in some paper, but I didn't bother about the date. I didn't think it necessary. Eric—Eric, you *weren't* going away without saying good-bye?"

He turned upon her so suddenly that she was frozen into silence.

"Would *you* have had anything to say, if you hadn't promised Gaisford not to communicate with me?"

"The usual things, Eric. I'd have told you what I was

doing, I'd have sent you my love. If you're tired of that, darling——"

"Not *that*, Barbara!"

Her eyes opened wide with distress.

"Eric, what's the matter? What have I done? Mayn't I even call you 'darling' now?"

"*Are* you being quite honest, Barbara?"

"Thank you, Eric!"

"Have you nothing to tell me since last time?"

She looked at him imperiously and considered her words before speaking.

"The last time we met? Or the last time we corresponded? Which d'you mean? The last time we corresponded was when your secretary telephoned to thank me for the flowers. Before that, you sent me a message by her that you probably wouldn't be well enough to take me to your first night. . . . I'd have come round the evening before if Dr. Gaisford hadn't made me promise not to. I've always said that I'd come to you from the ends of the earth if you were ill. When I heard that you weren't allowed to see any one——"

"It wasn't as bad as that," Eric interrupted. "Gaisford let me get up for the first night. I—caught sight of you in the distance. But I left after the first interval."

4

From the end of the table Lady Poynter was making desperate attempts to attract Eric's attention.

"Mr. Lane, you're the only person who can tell us this——"

Barbara touched his wrist and nodded past him.

"Margaret's trying to speak to you," she said.

Eric galvanized his attention and turned with a murmur of apology.

"Mr. Lane, is it true that 'Mother's Son' was refused *three—times?*" Lady Poynter asked. She could not have been more righteously indignant if she had been judging the three denials of Saint Peter. "I've never *heard* of such a thing!"

"It wasn't quite in its present form," Eric explained. "The theme's the same, but I've rewritten almost every word."

Lady Poynter nodded triumphantly.

"Ah! Then I was right!" she informed her neighbour, and Eric was free to turn again to Barbara.

"Where had we got to?" he asked, after a moment's embarrassed silence.

"You came to the theatre after all. You saw me. You left after the first interval," she reminded him fearlessly. "As you seem to be—drawing an indictment, is that the phrase?—don't you think you'd better go on?"

"There's nothing more to say. Once or twice I wondered whether I should get home alive; and, on my soul, I prayed the whole time that I shouldn't. . . . I'm not drawing an indictment. I rather expected to hear from you. . . . It wasn't easy waiting. . . . As for America, I didn't see how it could possibly interest you. . . ." He broke off and whispered to himself, "God! what those days of waiting were like! I should have thought that, after what *you'd* been through . . . in common humanity——"

"And if I had nothing to tell you?" she interrupted.

For a moment Eric did not understand her. For all her self-possession, there were shadows under her eyes, and she was haggard as on the night when they first met. Jack's appearance, then, and their conversation together had made no difference . . . no difference one way or the other; she had not telephoned because there was nothing to tell him.

"I don't think I've anything more to say, Babs."

An arm interposed itself between them, and he looked

down to see what was being put before him. To his surprise they had only reached the fish. He seemed to have been dining for an eternity!

"D'you care to hear what happened?" she asked.

"What d'you think I'm made of?" he muttered.

Barbara began eating her fish and telling her story at the same time. It was short, and she gave it in jerky little sentences. George Oakleigh had telephoned to say that he had two stalls for "Mother's Son" and would be delighted if she would dine and go with him. . . . They arrived and saw a certain number of friends. . . . At the end of the first act George went out to smoke a cigarette. . . . She had just begun talking to Gerry Deganway when she looked up and caught Jack's eye. . . . They were both so much surprised that they became praeternaturally natural. . . .

"I said: 'I've not seen you for a long time. I heard you were home.' He said: 'I got back a fortnight ago.' I asked him how he was and whether he'd had a very awful time in Germany. . . . And he laughed and said he was glad, on the whole, that it was all over, but that he was a fair German scholar now—or something of that kind—and he'd never have taken the trouble to learn another language if it hadn't been for the war. . . . I think he didn't find it easy to slip away; and I hate people leaning over me, when they're talking, so I asked him to sit down till George came back. *Then* the only thing we talked about was his being wounded and taken prisoner. I'd heard it all before, of course, but I felt I couldn't bear it if we both stopped talking. . . . Then George came along and shook hands. . . . And a moment later Jack went back to his place. You see, there wasn't very much to tell you."

"But is that all?"

"Absolutely all," she sighed.

Eric lapsed into silence, wishing that his brain were not

half paralyzed. Then he glanced round the table, counting their numbers.

"Say you're too tired to play bridge, Babs," he begged. "Or say you want to talk to me before I go away; we're such common property here that no one will be surprised. It's our last chance; we may never meet again——"

"But, Eric——?"

"Yes! . . . I haven't told even my own people. This is not blackmail, because I arranged it all before I saw you; I never expected to see you again after that night at the theatre. I was just trying to save something out of the wreckage. . . . I'm going away nominally for three months, but I'm not coming back. I could have got on happily enough, if you'd never come into my life; but, once you were there, I couldn't get rid of you. I couldn't go on living in England with you half a mile away, carved out of my life . . . meeting you, seeing you—and knowing that it was all over. I've looked on you as my wife; if you ran away from me and lived with another man, I couldn't keep on a flat next to yours. . . . I felt it at the theatre; I felt I must clear out; I couldn't sink back to any passionless friendship. So I arranged to go away and stay away. After three months I shall say that I'm going for a holiday in South America—or Japan. I've been moving quickly the last few days. This morning—and this afternoon—I knew that everything I was doing was for the last time. And since I've seen you——"

He looked round apprehensively, fearful that he was being overheard.

"You're going away like this from your people? But they love you, Eric! They're so proud of you! You'll break their hearts!"

"I shouldn't have done it eighteen months ago—before you took my education in hand," he answered bitterly. "I've given myself heart *and* soul to you."

He hardly cared now whether the servants or his neighbours heard him, and Barbara had to press his knee to restrain him.

"Then will you do something for me?" she asked.

"What is it?"

"I want you to come back. Come back in three months, when they expect you."

"And then?"

"I'm not asking for myself! I'm asking for them. You *can't* be so wicked! It's not like you; I don't know you when you talk like this. You'd break their hearts!"

"I don't know that this comes well from you, Babs."

"Nothing comes well from me. But, if I can't undo the harm I've done, I may at least stop adding to it. If you don't come back . . . When it's too late, you'll never forgive yourself."

He shook his head and looked at her defiantly.

"You should have thought of that when we first met in this room. Only one thing will bring me back or keep me from going."

"Dear Eric, don't start that again!"

"Thanks! It doesn't amuse *me* to be strung up and cut down and strung up again. . . . I was facing things—till Lady Poynter shewed the devilish irony to arrange this meeting."

"Won't you come back for my sake?" she whispered.

"To be told that you're going to marry some one else?"

"You may not be told that. I don't know."

Eric was filled with a blaze of anger; he had to pause long before he could be sure of his voice.

"You *still* don't want to let me go? The pathetic invocation of my mother——"

Barbara tried to speak and then turned away with a helpless shrug. Eric woke from a trance to a thunder of opposing voices. Lady Poynter was retailing the secret his-

tory of the latest political crisis and the fall of the Coalition Government. His wheezing, well-fed host was attacking the Board of Trade with ill-disguised venom. "They've cut down imports to such an extent," he was saying, "that in six months' time you won't be able to get a cigar fit to smoke. I went to my man this morning—he's a fellow I've dealt with all my life, and my father before me—he promised me *half* a cabinet—and then made a favour of it!" Another voice enquired in a drawl: "What is it exactly that you're lecturing on, Mr. Lane?"

Barbara's head was still turned from him, and he resigned himself to the reshuffle, noticing with surprise that a finger-bowl had been placed in front of him. He could not remember having eaten anything since the fish. And he had been drinking the rather sickly Gabarnac without tasting it.

"You asked my opinion of this wine, sir," he said to Lord Poynter, belatedly attentive; in a moment he was swallowed up in a discussion which dragged its way through dessert until Lady Poynter pushed back her chair and rustled majestically to the door.

She was hardly outside the room before his host sidled conspiratorially into the empty chair next him.

"Do you know anything of still champagne?" he enquired darkly, as though he were giving a pass-word.

"I've *drunk* it, of course," answered Eric.

"Of course?" Lord Poynter echoed. "My dear friend, not one man in twenty thousand of your generation has even *heard* of still champagne. . . ."

It was all wonderfully like that first night fifteen months before. Lord Poynter explained for the tenth time that he never allowed coffee to be brought in until the port wine had circulated for twenty minutes. Not for the first time he apologized for his brandy, retailed the tragedy of the last bottle of Waterloo and, like a sluggard dragging himself from bed, reluctantly moved the adjournment.

They arrived in the drawing-room to find three tables set for bridge. Though he had asked her to talk to him, Eric was relieved to find Barbara already playing; he had nothing more to say. There was nothing, indeed, to keep a man whose train left Euston before noon next day. He waited till Lady Poynter was dummy and then asked her to excuse him.

"Well, I expect you've a great deal to do," she said, shaking hands reluctantly.

"Oh, Eric, aren't you going to take me home?"

Barbara threw out the question casually, but she found time to look up and beseech him with her eyes.

"Are you going to be long?" he asked in the same tone.

"They're a game and sixteen. If you'll smoke *one* cigarette . . ."

In the next hand Barbara was dummy. After spreading out her cards, she looked round the room, picked up a review and two library novels from a side table and, after a cursory glance, walked to the piano. The bridge-players looked up, as she began to sing; an impatient, "It's you to play, Lady Poynter," passed unheeded; and, one after another, they laid down their hands.

*"One fine day, we'll notice
A thread of smoke arising on the sea
In the far horizon,
And then the ship appearing;—
Then the trim white vessel
Glides into the harbour, thunders forth her cannon.
See you? He is coming!
I do not go to meet him. Not I. I stay
Upon the brow of the hillock and wait, and wait
For a long time, but never weary
Of the long waiting.
From out the crowded city,
There is coming a man—
A little speck in the distance, climbing the hillock.
Can you guess who it is?"*

*And when he's reached the summit
Can you guess what he'll say?
He will call 'Butterfly' from the distance.
I, without answering,
Hold myself quietly concealed,
A bit to tease him, and a bit so as not to die
At our first meeting: and then, a little troubled,
He will call, he will call:
'Dear baby-wife of mine, dear little orange-blossom!'
The names he used to call me when he came here. . . ."*

"My dear, why don't you use that beautiful voice of yours more?" asked Lady Poynter, as she ended.

Barbara's face was in shadow, but Eric could see that she was looking across the room at him.

"Oh, not one person in ten million ever wants me to sing," she laughed, as she came back to the table.

Five minutes later she opened her purse, pushed a note across to Lady Poynter and came up to Eric with a smile of gratitude.

"I hope I haven't been long," she said. "Shall we see if we can find a taxi?"

5

They crossed Belgrave Square and reached Hyde Park Corner in silence. Then Eric felt a drag at his arm, and Barbara whispered: "I'm so tired!"

"I'm afraid there's not a taxi in sight," he said. "Shall we go by tube to Dover Street?"

"We may meet a taxi. Eric, d'you remember the first time——?"

He shook free of her arm, as though it were eating into his flesh.

"You felt the evening wouldn't be complete without that—after 'Butterfly'?" he asked.

Barbara stood still, swaying slightly until he caught her wrist.

"I'm shutting my eyes and thinking of the past, the time when we were happy," she gasped. "I can't face the present."

"You can face it as philosophically as I can," he answered. "If love were stronger than vanity . . . I don't blame you. I only blame myself because I was fool enough to believe a woman's word, fool enough to think that, if I gave her everything, she might give me something in return; that, if I shewed her enough magnanimity, I might shame her into being magnanimous. I was hopelessly uneducated in those days."

Barbara held up her hands as though each word struck her in the face.

"D'you *want* to part like this?" she whispered. "Wouldn't you rather remember the times when I came to you and cried—and you made me happy? I came to you when I was ill; and you just kissed me or stroked my forehead, and I was better. And once or twice, when you were ill, I came to you and laid your head on my breast. . . . Wouldn't you rather remember *that*, darling?"

"If I could only forget it, I shouldn't regret so bitterly the day when we first met."

She swayed again and caught hold of the wooden standard of a porter's rest. There was still no taxi in sight; Eric felt her pulse and dived into his pocket for a flask. He had never before noticed the rest or its inscription in honour of R. A. Slaney, for twenty-six years Member of Parliament for Shrewsbury. . . .

"Take a sip of this," he ordered.

She drank obediently and thanked him with her eyes.

"I'm better. The first time we met I was fainting in the train. Before I knew you. . . . And I loved you and dreamed of your love for me. I used to hear your voice. . . . No one will ever look after me as you've done; no one

will ever understand or love or make allowances for me——”

As he restored the flask to his pocket, Eric saw that the time was within a few minutes of midnight; in less than twenty-four hours he would be at Liverpool; in less than twenty-four minutes he would have lost the thing that was dearest to him in life.

“Barbara, you’ve seen Jack,” he said. “He had his chance; he neglected it. There’s the answer we’ve been waiting for all these weary months. I don’t want to worry you when you’re ill, but I can’t charge my own conscience with the knowledge that I’ve left undone anything which will stop the present tragedy.”

Though she opened her eyes slowly, there was now no trace of faintness or exhaustion.

“He never had a chance! Eric, if you’ll think for one moment—in a crowded theatre, with people listening all round——”

“He could have written the moment he left Germany. He could have written or seen you any time since that night. On the night itself he could have asked you to let him come and see you. He didn’t raise a finger! And you still hypnotize yourself with one excuse after another—How much longer are you going on?”

“I don’t know, Eric.” She covered her eyes for a moment and then rose to her feet. “I’m bound in honour, as I’ve told you a hundred times. When I know definitely——”

“Anything you know will have to be known to-night.”

“But if you found a cable waiting for you in New York——”

“It would tell me what I know already—plus the fact that your vanity had been convinced in spite of itself.”

“I prefer ‘honour’ to ‘vanity.’”

“Hadn’t we better leave ‘honour’ out of the discussion?”

She looked at him for a moment, her mouth tightly shut; then, declining his arm, she began walking slowly eastward. Opposite Bath House Eric hailed an empty taxi and told the driver to take them to Berkeley Square.

"You wouldn't like me to drop you in Ryder Street?" Barbara asked.

"Not even to gratify your love of artistic finish."

"How you hate me!" she whispered with a catch in her breath.

"No, I love you as much as ever; I need you more than ever. Whatever happens to you, I wish you all happiness. You once undertook my education, but I can tell you that you'll never find the happiness I'm wishing you till you learn to sink yourself and think of other people."

Barbara looked at him like a startled animal, then looked away.

"Haven't I sunk myself, haven't I thought of Jack before any one else for two and a half years?" she whispered.

"No, you've thought solely of yourself—with Jack as a limelight. At this moment you're thinking less of Jack or me than of your *amour propre*."

"You must be thankful to be rid of me after the way I've sacrificed you to my vanity."

"You'll outgrow your vanity."

"Perhaps Jack still wants me in spite of the way I've behaved to *him*."

"Perhaps so. I shan't be here to see."

The taxi turned into Berkeley Street, and Eric held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Barbara," he said.

"Won't you come in for a moment?"

"No, thank you."

"Eric, you must! There's something I want to say to you! Eric, I *beg* you to come in."

He opened the door without answering and stood on the

kerb, ready to help her out. She delayed so long that the driver turned curiously round.

"Eric, please!" she entreated.

"Have you your latch-key?"

She gave a choking sob, as she mounted the steps, and Eric set his teeth; suddenly losing control, she gripped him by the arm.

"Eric, you're *not* going to-morrow!"

"Indeed I am."

"When?"

"That's immaterial. Good-bye."

He returned to the taxi and pressed himself into the corner, staring ahead so that he should not see the familiar ermine coat on the door-step. Barbara fumbled blindly with the lock and spun round, as the taxi began slowly to turn. As the driver changed speed, she dropped her key and ran twenty yards down the square, crying "Eric!"; but the grinding of the gears drowned her voice.

The tail-light dwindled to a ruby pin-point and vanished. . . .

The telephone-bell was ringing, as Eric entered his flat. He unhooked the receiver and tossed it on to his bed; but after a moment's silence there broke out a persistent metallic buzzing, while the bells in the other rooms rang with all their accustomed clarity. He began to undress; but the merciless noise racked his nerves. There was nothing for it but to tie a handkerchief round the clapper of the bell. . . .

Then he threw himself in shirt and trousers on the bed and buried his face in his hands.

"A man does not continue drinking corked champagne. With women, his palate is less critical."—From the Diary of Eric Lane.

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